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EXEMPLARY PARENT-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IN TRANSITION
FROM ELEMENTARY TO MIDDLE LEVEL:
APPROACHES OF THE MIDDLE LEVEL PRINCIPAL

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

A multiple-case study was conducted in order to describe and understand how six nominated Illinois principals foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle level. Participants' attitudes, purposes, and practices with regard to parent-school partnerships during this critical period of change were explored over the course of three months through multiple semi-structured interviews. The transition from elementary to middle level sets the stage for a state of flux in norms, practices, and social situations for such partnerships. Findings may not be generalized to the population of middle level principals, although naturalistic generalizations or patterns emerged around the themes of participants' attitudes and beliefs (importance of relationships, influences and motivations, reflective approach to practice), participants' purposes for fostering parent-school partnerships (importance of democracy in practice, desired outcomes for the transition period), and participants' practices during the transition timeline (planning, activities, approaches to communication, principal modeling for parents and teachers with regard to barriers). Given the scarcity of literature on the topic of the elementary to middle school transition, particularly regarding parent-school partnerships, the purpose of this study was to simply begin understanding this topic through description. Opportunities for further study in this area exist, including these possibilities: Replicate this study; construct studies to compare and contrast approaches of the principal across a range of school and community demographics; expand the participant pool to middle level principals at large; and explore middle school principals' role in the transition from middle school to high school.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Study

A convergence of theoretical models, research-based recommendations, federal legislation, and actual school-level practice in the 1970s and 1980s created a progressive shift in paradigm for both the educational structure and philosophy at the middle level and for parent-school involvement at all levels of schooling. Once lesser-emphasized aspects of schooling, both the middle school and parent involvement movements emerged as important educational areas in response to a changing society in the latter twentieth century. The origin and path of the parent involvement movement is the point of departure for the literature review that follows.

At the intersection of middle level education and parent-school partnerships, a challenge emerges that calls for a leadership solution. During the 1990s educational organization theory experienced a significant paradigm shift that aligned the school leadership literature with the parent-school partnership literature, both practically and philosophically. This preface systematically sets forth the connections among the literatures that contribute to this dissertation, ultimately focusing on the role of the middle level principal as the unit of study.

The role of parents in schooling has changed dramatically over time, with families initially taking responsibility for their children's education during colonial times and the state assuming increasingly greater control as the 1800s progressed. Following World War II, the growth of the baby boom era accompanied by the child psychology movement created an intensified focus on schooling, yet parents remained largely separated from the workings of the school (Barbour & Barbour, 2001; Berger, 1991). Middle schools emerged in the 1960s in response to the existing junior high school structure that did not address the perceived needs of early adolescents. Coinciding with the growth of the parent involvement movement, the middle

school philosophy was fully actualized in the 1980s through a cohesive research-based doctrine that, for the first time, provided comprehensive guidance for building an educational program around the characteristics of early adolescents, including the critical component of parent involvement (George & Alexander, 1993; George, Stevenson, Thomason, & Beane, 1992; Wiles & Bondi, 2001).

Theoretical groundwork that advanced the parent-school partnership ascendancy included Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) ecological systems theory that focused on the interrelationship between the developmental process of the child and his environment. Bronfenbrenner's model justified a connection between home and school. Comer (1980) advocated for a fully integrated parent program in schools. Most germane to this study, Epstein (1983, 1987b) embarked on what evolved into a career of building a research base regarding parent-school partnerships. Her theoretical model of *Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School, and Community*, and particularly the subsequent addition of the framework of six major types of parent involvement (Epstein et al., 1992), became the widely accepted guide for parent-school partnerships through to the present. Emerging contemporary theoretical approaches have extended the work of these foundational theorists, seeking to advance understanding through the additional psychological dimensions of parent perceptions, beliefs, and motivations (Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007).

Key policy recommendations and federal legislation, including *Turning Points: Preparing Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) and *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (U.S. Congress, 1994) formalized the connection between middle level education and parent-school partnerships by recommending and mandating parent involvement, respectively. Now formally deemed important, much remained to be learned, and

exploration of the intersection between these areas began in earnest. Empirical studies of the relationship between parent-school partnerships at middle level and student outcomes are reviewed in chapter 2 of this dissertation. While positive effects have been documented and are widely assumed, research has at times been inconsistent and disjointed due to the socially complex and varied aspects of parent-school partnerships.

There is empirical agreement, however, that as students grow older parent involvement decreases (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Eccles & Harold, 1993, 1996; Epstein, 1987a; Singh et al., 1995). Barriers to parent-school partnerships at middle level are well-documented in the literature, and the period of transition from elementary to middle level has been exposed as a time of weakness.

From the intersection of the parent-school partnership and school leadership literatures, I composed a conceptual framework that illustrates the *principal as community builder* metaphor as an overarching structure within which practical guidance for the principal in furthering parent-school partnerships is nested. The role of the principal during the transition period is located at the center of this nested structure as the gap that was explored in this study. This conceptual framework, which is discussed further in chapter 3, guided my research protocol and the organization of case study data. It is not an attempt to initiate a theoretical perspective.

The basis for my conceptual framework began with the leadership literature, which is consistent in the view that school principals are central to “causing schools to be the way they are or changing the way they might be” (Barth as cited in Houts, 1976, p. 21). Particular to the focus of this study, scholars agree that principals are critical agents in the support of relationships among the school community and partnership programs (Chavkin & Williams, 1987; Epstein, 1987a; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Fullan, 2001; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004). Perspectives of

the principalship have evolved over time; and educational organization theorists have been at the center of an effort to re-culture school leadership in the post-behavioral science era. Metaphors have emerged as an important vehicle in this search for meaning. Multiple key voices have concluded that relationships are critical in this quest and have re-cast the school leader in the metaphoric role of community-builder (Beck, 2002; Beck & Murphy, 1993; Furman, 2002a; Murphy, 2002b; Sergiovanni, 1994, 2000). In addition, professional standards for school leaders that recognize the principal's function regarding the parent-school partnership are discussed in the literature review (Council of Chief State Officers, 1996, 2008, 2014).

In general, transition is defined as “a passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another: CHANGE” (Merriam-Webster, 2012, p. 1329). The transition from elementary to middle level adds an emotionally loaded quality to this definition. Much of the literature regarding such transitions is focused solely on students' fears and concerns. These accounts are typically found in practitioner journals with article titles like “The Scary World of Middle School” (Adams, 2008) or “Change Is Hard” (George, Breslin, & Evans, 2007). Parent-school partnerships, if discussed at all in these pieces, are not the emphasis.

Change is the operational word in the definition of transition. Educational organization scholars have identified many reasons that change in school communities is a most difficult challenge for school leaders. In the case of parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle level, parents experience changing norms, practices, and social situations. The individual and collective meanings formed at the elementary level are thrown into a state of flux during the transition period, as parents may experience ambiguity and uncertainty about the future, mirroring, or even fueling, the fears and concerns of their children (Fullan, 1991; Sergiovanni, 2000).

The previously mentioned decline in parent involvement at middle level, which the literature review addresses citing the factors of ambiguity, uncertainty, and even ambivalence, is the likely explanation for the near dearth of literature (even of the practitioner sort) that addresses parent-school partnerships during the period of transition. Despite the shallow research base in the area of parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle level, there are several empirical studies that have examined parents' perceptions during this potentially challenging time and resources that may support parents. These studies, which are discussed in the literature review, typically identify the importance of the principal's role in this regard, if only tangentially (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Epstein & Herrick, 1991; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991).

Herein lies the research gap: The literatures regarding parent-school partnerships and principal leadership are deeply based on theory and empirical studies. Findings in these literatures sometimes lack coherence and are equivocal, yet the importance of these areas is not disputed. The literature regarding parent-school partnerships at middle level clearly identifies decreased participation compared to that of elementary schools. Barriers to middle level participation are unequivocally identified in the literature, yet literature regarding parent involvement during the critical period of transition is virtually non-existent. While the importance of the principal with regard to parent-school partnerships is fully accepted in the literature, the literature is all but silent on the principal's role during the transition period that marks the start of parent-school partnership decline. This study seeks to address this gap by describing what nominated middle level principals do to further exemplary parent-school partnerships in transition.

Statement of the Problem

While parental involvement is consistently noted as a key characteristic of middle school philosophy and practice in the literature, Epstein and others have noted the decrease of such involvement beginning with the transition from elementary to middle school. It is common to find that the relatively high level of parent-school partnership activity at the elementary level declines when children reach early adolescence and concomitantly transition from elementary to middle school. This transition from elementary to middle level has been shown to be the line of divarication regarding the quality of parent-school partnerships and the quantity of interaction between home and school. The relationship between parents and schools is challenged as norms, procedures, and social relationships change.

The middle level principal, as school leader and community-builder, plays a key role in the nature of parent-school partnerships, occupying a unique position from which to influence the shape and feel of such. The principal's leadership is essential in helping parents re-establish meaning and practice for parent-school partnerships that align to a new stage in their child's development and schooling. It is problematic that the literature regarding the role of the principal at this critical time of transition is shallow, at best. The parent-school partnership at the time of transition is vulnerable; the principal is in a position to provide leadership; but there is little research in this particular area of leadership from which to draw direction.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to describe and understand how nominated middle level principals foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle school. Through a multiple-case study of six middle level principals in

Illinois, I examined participants' attitudes, purposes, and practices with regard to parent-school partnerships during this transition period. The central phenomenon studied was the manner in which nominated middle level principals fostered exemplary parent-school partnerships during a critical period of change, when the transition from elementary to middle level sets the stage for a state of flux in norms, practices, and social situations for such partnerships. This central phenomenon was studied through the participants' descriptions and perceptions of all that they do to further parent-school partnerships during the time of transition, which includes, but was not limited to their attitudes, purposes, and practices.

Research Question

This study seeks to answer one broadly stated question: *How do nominated middle level principals foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle school?* The focus on the *how* opens the study to explore what principals do and think as they foster parent-school partnerships. The umbrella of this singular question, while appropriately focused, is purposely open-ended in order to allow for the exploration and description of the range of principals' attitudes, purposes, and practices as they emerged through this case study.

Methods

This multiple-case study design involved six middle level principals as the units of analysis. Participants were selected through a nomination process that identified principals who were described by nominees as middle level leaders who foster exemplary parent-school partnerships, particularly at the time of transition from elementary to middle level.

Questions designed to identify middle level principals who foster exemplary parent-school partnerships were compiled in a web-based nomination questionnaire. Illinois middle school administrators received this nomination questionnaire via email through the Illinois Principals Association's PrinciPal Digest. This process failed to produce an adequate number of nominations so additional means were employed, as described in chapter 3. From the pool of nominations, participants who potentially fostered exemplary parent-school partnerships were identified. Those principals were invited to participate in a telephone interview for which the questions and rubric assessment were developed based on my conceptual framework. Six principals were selected for this study based on the strength of their telephone interviews and their expressed willingness to participate.

In-depth face-to-face and follow-up Skype and telephone interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format to gather rich, thick data that contributed to the description and understanding of the attitudes, purposes, and practices of these principals regarding the research purpose and question of this study. Differentiated questions were determined as the interviews progressed, following the lead of participants' responses. "Interviewers must listen hard to assess the progress of the interview and to stay alert for cues about how to move the interview forward as necessary" (Seidman, 2013, p. 82). The strategy of member checking was employed on an ongoing basis, both formally and informally, in order to strengthen reliability.

This study of similar cases (those of middle school principals nominated for the purpose of this study) provided a basis for examining principals' attitudes, purposes, and practices that support parent-school partnerships during the transition from elementary to middle school. Multiple-case studies provided a form of replication that supports the search for common themes and potentially a cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2014). Schools in cities having a population

exceeding 500,000 were excluded from this study (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2014, p. 660), because such schools operate under different rules from those of all other Illinois school districts, thereby limiting access.

Interviews were transcribed in a consistent, verbatim manner, then coded through the use of qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 10 for Mac. An initial proposed list of codes was based on my conceptual framework, and these codes evolved as the analysis process proceeded. During the data analysis phase, a plan to report data was developed. All relevant ethical and Internal Review Board (IRB) requirements were fully adhered to and documented.

Significance of the Study

This study aims to further the understanding of the middle level principal's role in fostering exemplary parent-school partnerships at the critical time of transition from elementary to middle level. Understandings or themes gained from this study aim to contribute to the literature regarding the attitudes, purposes, and practices of the principal in fostering such partnerships during the period of transition. This study may also inform principals' practice regarding parent-school partnerships including, but not limited to, implications for teacher professional development and the establishment of parent involvement programs.

Limitations

Limitations of this study are consistent with the limitations of qualitative research in general. Qualitative research experts acknowledge the limitations of naturalistic data processing and constantly work to overcome the realities of data overload, inconsistent availability of

information, and perceived uneven reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The interview process led to rich descriptions, adding to the research base regarding middle level leadership for parent-school partnerships and transition from elementary to middle level, however findings may not be generalized to the population of middle level principals. Naturalistic generalizations consistent with case studies did emerge. As Stake (1995) explains, “People can learn much that is general from single cases” (p. 85). This multiple-case study of six nominated middle level principals who foster exemplary parent-school partnerships uncovered themes and meaning, however this small number of cases does not provide conclusive evidence of theories or patterns.

“Personal distortions” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302) are a potential limitation of this study, as qualitative data were collected primarily through the interviews of participants. Interviews introduced the possibility of unintended or deliberate distortions by participants, particularly because they were the sole source of data collection. Although the technique of continuous member checking was employed, the possibility of such distortions remains a limitation of this study.

In addition to distortions by participants, there is the possibility of distortion by the qualitative researcher. According to Merriam (1998), “The investigator as human instrument is limited by being human—that is, mistakes are made, opportunities are missed, personal biases interfere” (p. 20). Merriam explains that researchers who are intuitive, communicate well, and can tolerate ambiguity are less fallible human research instruments due to those personality traits. Lincoln and Guba (1985) present a more optimistic assessment of the “admittedly low-fidelity

(imperfect) [human] instruments” (p. 106) by describing qualitative researchers as adaptable and knowledgeable.

Delimitations

This study does not address parent involvement at middle level in its entirety, although there was considerable overlap of partnership practices, in general, and of those particularly related to the period of transition. The focus of this study is not on school factors, but rather is delimited to only a small number of middle school settings in Illinois without regard to any factor other than the work of the principal in the area of fostering exemplary parent-school partnerships. The focus of interviews with selected principal participants was delimited to parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle level. There are many other aspects of middle level education that could be studied with regard to parent involvement. There is certainly information to be gleaned regarding similarities and differences among rural and urban schools, male and female students and/or parents, socioeconomic variables, grade level factors, and many other aspects of middle level schooling that will not be included in this study.

Another important delimitation to mention is that of community involvement. Most current thought on parent-school partnerships includes a wider community (outside of the school) component. In order to delimit this study, only the parent and school components were addressed. It is important to separate this specific concept of community from the broader idea of building community that is discussed at length in the leadership section of chapter 2.

Definition of Terms

Principals who were nominated for their work in fostering exemplary parent-school partnerships are the focus of this study. *Exemplary* is defined according to *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate® Dictionary* (2012): “deserving imitation because of excellence” (p. 437). Participants were determined through a nomination process in keeping with this definition, which is qualitative in nature.

School leadership is one of the literatures reviewed in this dissertation. While some references are to *school leaders* in general, for the purpose of this study, no reference is discussed that does not also apply to the middle level principal, as he or she is the unit of study. At times the term *school leader* may be substituted for *middle level principal*.

As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, transition is defined as “a passage from one state, stage, subject, or place to another: CHANGE” (Merriam-Webster, 2012, p. 1329). This definition is particularly important to this study, as the distinct period of transition from elementary to middle school serves as a temporal setting. It is also important to note that this dictionary definition serves as the best description of this period in the context of parent-school partnerships, as school transition literature is all but non-existent and I have been unable to find an adequate academic definition.

The term *parent-school partnership* is used consistently throughout this dissertation. A mild debate exists in the literature about the nomenclature that best describes the interaction between home and school. Schlechty (2005), while agreeing that partnership is an important goal, is critical of the term: “It is commonplace to apply the word *partner* to parents, hoping, I suppose, to indicate the mutual interest parents and teachers have in the welfare of each child” (p. 183). Schlechty opines that the term *partnership* implies that both the school and parents are

committed to the education of all students, yet, typically parents actually advocate only for their own children, rejecting the expansive view that Schlechty envisions. Epstein (2001), however, advocates for a different approach to the reasoning behind the terminology. She describes the commonly used wording *parent involvement* as “amorphous” (p. 40) and prefers to “recast the emphasis from parent involvement (left up to the parent) to *school and family partnerships*” (p. 40). Epstein (2011) explains that the more precise term *partnership* recognizes “shared responsibilities of educators, parents, and others . . . understands the multidimensional nature of involvement at the school . . . and recognizes multilevel leadership” (p. 43). My choice of *parent-school partnerships* is based on this line of thinking.

One final clarification of terms is regarding the word *parent*. Decker and Decker (2003) describe the reality of changing families in today’s society. Therefore, in this study the term *parent* will refer to the child’s primary caregiver. Epstein (1987a) emphasizes:

Families differ . . . [and] administrators can assist teachers who must deal with differently structured families—one- and two-parent homes, mother working or unemployed parents, well-educated or poorly educated parents, teenage or young parents, non-English-speaking parents, and other family configurations. (p. 131)

A Personal Note

Serendipity brought me to middle level. The newest of only three middle schools in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) was about to open and a vacant position arose only days prior to the start of school. My dream of becoming a primary educator ended abruptly when fresh out of college, during the unfavorable job market of 1975, I reluctantly and with much trepidation accepted this position, the only one I had been offered. Eighteen years of middle school teaching and 12 years of middle level administration later, I am a proud proponent of all things middle level. Experience, professional development and growth, and much reflection have convinced me

of the value of middle school philosophy and practice. I embrace the unique stage of early adolescence and its educational implications and responsibilities.

True to the research reviewed in chapter 2, I have experienced first-hand the challenges of parent-school partnerships at middle level. In my professional experience, good intentions and grant-funded parent programs in underserved Chicago neighborhoods did not yield appreciable results, parent participation in school governance through the CPS Local School Councils was disappointing and frustrating at best, and even in my most recent principalship at a high performing Chicago area suburban middle school with active and enthusiastic parent involvement, the activities and interactions did not reach the level of deep, collaborative partnership.

As described by Schlechty (2005), “the uneasy relationship between schools and parents” (p. 207) was at the essence of my experience in my most important life role as the mother of early adolescent daughters. My firsthand experience was, in fact, that middle schools can be uncaring places characterized by negative educator perceptions of parents and negative parent perceptions of schools. School leadership can be the linchpin that makes positive relationships between home and school a reality.

As a former middle level principal, I am cognizant of the value of a well-conceived and executed articulation process from elementary to middle school and realize the import of the principal’s role in fostering a successful transition for students and parents. This study is personal for me. It gave me an opportunity to learn and reflect about an area of much needed attention. It is my hope that lessons learned and conclusions drawn as a result of this study will inform leadership attitudes and practices and will contribute to quality transition experiences for parents, students, and educators.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

The subject of this study is the middle school principal in the context of parent-school partnerships in transition. This review synthesizes, circumscribes, and critiques the salient theories, research, historical context, and recommendations for practice in extant literature, all of which inform the study of the central research question: *How do nominated middle level principals foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle school?* In the tradition of the case study, qualitative data and organizational themes emerged from in-depth interviews of the participants. This review of the literature serves to demonstrate the value of this study, establish boundaries, and provide guidance for the research design and protocol that support the study's purpose.

The three literatures of parent-school partnerships, principal leadership, and transition to middle level provide the structure for this review. The literatures of parent-school partnerships and principal leadership are both broad, encompassing many topics that are not pertinent to this study. The discussion in these first two sections examines these literatures as they pertain to this study and intersect with one another. The final section on middle level transition further narrows the focus to the intersection of all three literatures. The relatively shallow middle level transition literature is critiqued, a research-worthy gap identified, and the rationale for this study established.

Parent-School Partnerships in Relation to Principal Leadership

Waller (1932) expresses his brutally honest observation:

The fact seems to be that parents and teachers are natural enemies, predestined each for the discomfiture of the other. The chasm is frequently covered over, for neither parents

nor teachers wish to admit to themselves the uncomfortable implications of their animosity, but on occasion it can make itself clear enough. The reasons for this rarely admitted enmity are not hard to find. There is the fact . . . that parents and teachers wish the child to prosper in different ways, that they wish him well according to different standards of well-being. . . . But parents are supposed to support the school, and conscientious parents must often have some difficulty in arriving at a rational attitude toward the program of the schools. In a sense, this is the individual side of the old conflict between the institution and the community. (p. 68)

Seventy-three years later, Schlechty (2005) describes a somewhat less pointed, but still extant view of the “uneasy relationship between schools and parents” (p. 207):

Though it causes some discomfort to educators committed to public schools (and I count myself among them), any reasonable analysis of the relationship between families and schools will surely reveal an almost inherent tension between the organization called public school and parents. (p. 207)

The foundations that established the importance of, sometimes tense, parent-school partnerships and empirical studies of the effects of such relationships will be reviewed here. This section concludes with recommendations for principal practice in this area. The focus here is not yet specifically on middle level, but is on parent-school partnerships, in general.

Evolution of contemporary theory and practice. Between the 1930s and today, a growing awareness of the importance of parent involvement as a necessary component of schooling has advanced theory and practice in this area. The situation was not always as bleak as the opening quotes would suggest. Beck’s and Murphy’s (1993) accounting of relationships between parents and principals in historical accounts of the 1940s and 1950s describe principals engaging parents in school activities and, at times, reciprocal communication and collaborative decision-making. However, it was not until the 1980s that parent-school partnership theories were advanced in earnest and studies explored the effectiveness of partnerships between school and home. The role of principals in this regard grew initially from the parent-school partnership literature and came to intersect with principal leadership, one of the main literatures of this review. Significant commonalities exist between these two literatures regarding guidance for

principals, and this guidance is the basis for the research design that seeks to describe middle level principal practice in fostering exemplary parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle level.

Theoretical foundations. Hawley (1950) describes human ecology as a sociological concern that focuses on the development and organization of the community and the structure of the interrelationships therein, acknowledging that relationships “are inextricably interwoven with sentiments, value systems, and other ideational constructs” (p. 73). Theoretical perspectives that emerged in the 1980s regarding the connection between families and schools (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Connors & Epstein, 1995; Epstein, 1987b; Epstein, 2011) were influenced by Hawley’s sociological work. Hawley advanced the *human ecology theory* recognizing that, driven by their individual perspectives, human beings adapt to their environment by forming interdependencies within the human population (Emmons, Comer, & Haynes, 1996; Mawhinney, 2002). Emmons, Comer, and Haynes (1996) state that the “distinguishing characteristic of human ecology is the idea that human adjustment to habitat is a community development process” (p. 34). This theoretical view extends to the notion of organizational ecology, which emphasizes cooperation and relationships, just as it acknowledges the strong default position of inertia and resistance to change (Emmons et al., 1996; Mawhinney, 2002).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Emmons et al. (1996) also cite the relevance of Lewin’s (1935) social psychology theory (or field theory) for its description of how the life space or psychological field of the individual becomes increasingly complex and differentiated throughout his or her development. Hawley’s theory, which addresses interrelationships within the community, combined with Lewin’s theory, which addresses the experience of the individual, established the foundation for scholars in the 1980s to develop theories of how

parents and schools interact on behalf of the child. As discussed here, the perspectives that have emerged from these sociological and psychological foundations quite naturally include the concept of adjustment and transition as individuals move through life's developmental stages.

Scholars have extended these sociological and psychological theories to the connection between families and schools (organizations), and the resultant theories have been categorized into the three broad perspectives of separate (or sequenced) influences, embedded influences, and overlapping influences (Connors & Epstein, 1995). The perspective of separate influences best describes the independence of school from family with regard to education in the United States through the 1950s (Barbour, Barbour, & Scully, 2011; Berger, 1991; Connors & Epstein, 1995; Cutler, 2000).

Various models and conceptual frameworks of parent-school involvement have been advanced post-separate influences perspective. Two theories, originated by Bronfenbrenner and Epstein (1987b), whose seminal work is detailed in the following section, exemplify the embedded and overlapping influences perspectives, respectively. Almost without exception, scholars of parent-school partnerships refer and defer to one or both of these leaders in the field, often basing their own models on the work of Bronfenbrenner and/or Epstein.

Bronfenbrenner's embedded view of the parent-school relationship is framed by his ecological systems theory in which "external influences . . . affect the capacity of families to foster the healthy development of their children" (1986, p. 723). Bronfenbrenner (1977) defines the ecology of human development as:

the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life span, between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded. (p. 514)

Wright, Stegelin, and Hartle (2007) cite Bronfenbrenner's theory because "the ecosystem explanation of the intersecting forces in a child's life helps us to understand [the interdependent relationships among children, parents, and schools]" (p. 14). Bronfenbrenner (1979) says these interdependent relationships are structured "like a set of Russian dolls" (p. 3). These nested environmental structures are identified as the microsystem (relating to the nuclear family), the mesosystem (including the home-school relationship), the exosystem (settings removed from the child's environment), and the chronosystem (passage of time or life transitions). Pertinent to the setting of this study, Bronfenbrenner's model has been used to explain an ecological view of adolescence when the adolescent is placed at the center of the microsystem (Rice & Dolgin, 2008).

Bronfenbrenner's work is most significant for justifying and explaining the connection between home and school by focusing on the interrelationship between the developmental process of the child and his environment. The ecological systems theory has positive implications for student advocacy, policy, and practice in relationship to the parent-school partnership (Beveridge, 2005; Connors & Epstein, 1995), therefore this theory continues to inform scholarship regarding parent-school partnerships to the present, including those at middle level (Beveridge, 2005; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; San Antonio, 2004; Seginer, 2006).

While Bronfenbrenner and Epstein represent the gold standard in contemporary parent-school partnership theory, other models exist, often displaying commonalities because these models share the Bronfenbrenner and/or Epstein foundations. Models and conceptual frameworks in this area tend to position along a continuum that ranges from independence to mutuality. The term *parent involvement* is less enlightened, as it implies that the parent's needs are subservient to those of the school, whereas *parent-school partnership* implies a mutuality of

purpose and interaction. Some models are heavily parent-centered, focusing on parent involvement in terms of parents' needs and strengths as they relate to the school's ability and willingness to devote the time and effort necessary to involve the parents (Cervone & O'Leary, 1982; Hornby, 2000; Lombana, 1983). Other scholars stress the importance of moving from the more simplistic concept of involvement to partnership and greater mutuality (Swap, 1993; Williams & Chavkin, 1989). Most models for parent involvement/partnership acknowledge the importance of communication between home and school, particularly that which is two-way (Gordon, 1979; Hornby, 2000; Marjoribanks, 2002; Swap, 1993; Williams & Chavkin, 1989).

Of note is Comer's ecological approach that places the child squarely at the center of the setting in an embedded manner, connecting the full complement of school stakeholders in the School Development Program model. Comer's theoretical framework is one of child development and school reform, not singularly one of parent-school partnership, however his focus on parent involvement is significant (Comer, Haynes, & Joyner, 1996; Comer & Haynes, 1991). The parent empowerment aspect of this model allows parents to exercise influence within the school setting, contributing to the concept of social capital as set forth by Coleman (1990).

Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence theory. Using research from the disciplines of sociology and psychology, including that of Bronfenbrenner, Epstein (1987b) studied how the approaches and philosophies of educators and parents influenced the nature of the family-school connection. Her prolific engagement with relationships between home and school variables dates back to a longitudinal study (Epstein, 1983) that examined student, family, and school characteristics as they related to student achievement (beginning with 960 middle school students and continuing through high school). Epstein and her colleagues continued studying parent-school relationships, the quality and quantity of which exposed a pattern. Epstein (2001) states:

Data from my own and many other studies revealed repeated evidence that educators who worked *in partnership* with families and communities were more effective than those who worked in isolation in improving school climate, teachers' professional behavior, parents' confidence, and students' success in school. (p. 74)

The *Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School, and Community* that emerged (to be referred to here as *Overlapping Spheres of Influence*) addressed gaps in the family-school separation perspective of the 1930s-1950s and the embedded interrelationship perspective of the 1970s-1980s. According to Epstein (2011) the previous theories neglected to address the ongoing development of students, to adequately characterize the influence of schools and families on each other, and to accommodate for social change, therefore she proposed this social-organization perspective.

Epstein's (1987b) *Overlapping Spheres of Influence* model originally featured an external structure of two overlapping spheres (representing the family and the school) and an internal structure that represented the types and levels of interaction among these spheres. The external and internal structures work together to indicate the relationships among the spheres as the forces of change affect them.

This theory was later modified to include a third sphere of influence: the community (Epstein, 2011), which is outside the focus of this study. The three spheres identify settings in which the child simultaneously belongs: family, school, and the community. These spheres overlap in a Venn diagram that indicates areas that are shared by two or all of the spheres, as well as areas within each sphere that are non-overlapping. The degree of overlap among spheres is not static, but is affected by four forces:

Force A – Time/Age/Grade level [of the child]

Force B – Experience, Philosophy, Practices of Family

Force C – Experience, Philosophy, Practices of School

Force D – Experience, Philosophy, Practices of Community (Epstein, 2011, p. 32)

This review has been delimited to the spheres and forces that represent student, family, and school.

Through a close examination of the area of overlap between the family and school spheres of influence, Epstein (1992) constructed a typology of involvement practices that connected practice to her *Overlapping Spheres of Influence* theory. She determined that “five important types of involvement help families and schools fulfill their shared responsibilities for children’s learning and development” (p. 11). Epstein later added a sixth type of involvement regarding the sphere of the community.

Known as the *Six Types of Involvement* (which will be delineated in a subsequent section on recommendations for principal practice), Epstein’s typology has been used extensively by researchers of parent involvement practices. Combined, her *Overlapping Spheres of Influence* model and the *Six Types of Involvement* stand as the seminal theory and structure for practice in the area of parent-school partnerships at all grade levels.

Director of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University, Epstein has been at the center of much of the research on parent-school partnerships for more than 30 years, however her dominance of the school, family, and community field has not precluded study in this area by others. She co-initiated the International Network of Scholars (INET) in 1991, through which she connects scholars who study any combination of school, family, and community topics and encourages research in this area (Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships, 2015). A number of the authors cited in this review are protégés of Epstein.

In addition to parent-school partnership theory, Epstein studied middle level issues during the early years of the middle school movement. Reference to her middle level research will be included in a subsequent section of this review. Her family-school research has specifically included a focus on middle level education from the start, and she remains a pre-eminent authority on the convergence of these two areas. With the importance of parent-school partnerships firmly established through theory, an increasingly narrow research focus on specific aspects of this topic is called for in order to further refine the knowledge base and to inform practice.

Emerging perceptions and motivational influences theories. Both Bronfenbrenner's (embedded influences) and Epstein's (overlapping influences) theories focus strongly on external structures inherent in the ecological framework, which, particularly in Epstein's work, lead to concrete recommendations. Beginning in the 1990s, scholars began to look beyond these structurally external perspectives that were influenced by sociology and human ecology theory by focusing on the comparatively internalized structures of psychology: the characteristics of individuals. These emerging theories, as with previous parent-school involvement theories, are multifaceted. In order to provide a unifying description by which to discuss these emerging theories, I have applied the label of *perceptions and motivational influences* to this final section in my review of parent-school partnership theories.

Psychologically based models of parent-school partnership focus less on external structures and concrete recommendations. This trend of inquiry pursues, instead, the *why* and the *how* of parent-school partnerships. It is important to note that those who research in this vein do not reject Epstein's theory and body of work, rather they cite her work often and seek to build on its foundation.

There is some agreement that belief systems of parents contribute to positive partnerships and possibly, in turn, positive outcomes for children. Based on the work of Bandura (1989), scholars pursuing this psychological approach refer to the self-efficacy of parents. Parents first believe that their involvement is of value, then they choose to participate in areas of comfort and perceived competency (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, 1997; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). Motivational models are based on the premise that a positive feedback loop is established when the parent's involvement influences the child's perceived competence, which may influence the child's performance, which may in turn influence the parent's increased involvement. In this manner, the involvement is based on quality of interactions, including positive affect and positive beliefs about the child's potential and the relationship with the school (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Motivational models assume perceived opportunities for parents (e.g., inviting school environment), however the parent with a strong sense of self-efficacy will deem his or her participation important, invited or not (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

Gladwell (2008) illustrated this positive feedback loop in his best-selling book, *Outliers, The Story of Success*. He tells the story of Canadian hockey players, American baseball players, and European soccer players—the story in which children's leagues are organized by cut-off birthdates, much like our graded system of schooling. Gladwell describes how older, more developmentally coordinated players are perceived as more talented and a feedback loop is set in motion. These older players are chosen for elite teams, thereby receiving better coaching, improving their play through competition with better players, and getting more playing time. Gladwell credits sociologist Robert Merton for “famously call[ing] this phenomenon the ‘Matthew Effect’ after [a] New Testament verse. . . . [that essentially states] it is those who are

successful, in other words, who are most likely to be given the kinds of special opportunities that lead to further success” (p. 30).

Approaches of perceptions and motivational influences trace the path from parent and teacher beliefs to parent and teacher practices to child outcomes. These approaches enter the internal realm of the mind where a parent’s personal construct of a role that includes parent-school partnership may be the *why* that influences them to act (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Principals’ understanding of such influences may enhance their commitment to building relationships with parents and including them in school life in personally meaningful ways. The extension of parent-school partnership research through the perspectives of these additional dimensions, may help practitioners better learn how to further parent-school partnerships.

Parent-school partnerships matter: Effects research. An accepted and often preferred manner of assessing the success of any aspect of schooling is to analyze its relationship to increased student achievement or other measurable results. According to Deal and Peterson (1999), “When leaders invest in a culture that nurtures and challenges staff, student, and community, it pays off in learning outcomes” (p. 139). Much research has explored the effectiveness of parent-school partnerships, typically with regard to academic achievement of students.

Singh et al. (1995) caution that because parent-school partnerships appear to be stronger in the elementary grades, it follows that the effects of parent involvement will differ according to student age. Studies have documented robust findings of positive relationships between parent-school partnerships and student achievement at the elementary level (Hill & Craft, 2003; Griffith, 1996; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). It has also been documented that the decline in

parent-school partnerships at middle level contributes to a somewhat less robust, yet still positive effect of the parent-school partnership on student achievement at middle level (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). This summary of effects research focuses solely on studies about parent-school partnerships at middle level, in keeping with the purpose of this study.

Researchers acknowledge that the importance of parent-school partnerships is, at times, simply assumed in the literature (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995), and often scholars pronounce it as fact (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1996; Henderson & Berla, 1995; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Henderson and Mapp (2002) state unequivocally,

The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school. . . . When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. (p. 7)

This widely accepted enthusiasm is tempered by researchers, Fan and Chen (2001):

The idea that parental involvement has a positive influence on students' academic achievement is so intuitively appealing that society in general, and educators in particular, have considered parental involvement an important ingredient for the remedy for many problems in education. (p. 1)

Based on their meta-analysis of studies correlating parent involvement and student achievement (not limited to middle level), Fan and Chen (2001) opine that empirical evidence of this positive influence is riddled with inconsistencies. While they did find positive relationships between parent-school partnerships and student achievement, they also found that the literature contained a limited number of empirical studies and that findings of these studies were equivocal. Perhaps the most intriguing limitation is related to the preceding section about the theoretical basis for parent-school partnerships. There is no single model for parent-school involvement and studies do not address one monolithic concept of this notion, therefore comparison is challenging. Fan and Chen (2001) state, "Despite its intuitive meaning, the

operational use of *parent involvement* has not been clear and consistent. Parent involvement has been defined in practice as representing many different parental behaviors and parenting practices” (p. 3).

Similarly, Boyd (2006), Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) and Sui-Chu and Willms (1996) argue against a uni-dimensional understanding of parent involvement. Studies reviewed here typically revolve around one or more of Epstein’s *Six Types of Involvement*. In addition, several studies focus on the emerging perceptions and motivational influences theories. Key in understanding the following review of empirical studies is that, for the most part, the relationships they uncover are correlational, not directional or causal. Stevenson and Baker (1987) explain, “We assume that parental involvement does affect school performance but an alternative and tenable explanation is that parents who have better-performing children become more involved in school activities” (p. 1356).

Prior to reviewing the pertinent studies, it worth noting that not all family-school involvement is positive and, according to Pomerantz et al. (2007), “Contrary to what is often assumed, more involvement on parents’ part may not always be better for children” (p. 374). Differences in effects between high and low socio-economic status, particularly with regard to race and income, have been widely documented (Desimone, 1999; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jesse, Davis, & Pokorny, 2004; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). Also, not all quality activities and experiences lead to improved grades and higher test scores. Therefore, Epstein (2001) advocates for an improved definition of success. She states, “There are many measures of achievement besides standardized test scores that indicate students’ success in school. Some of these may be more responsive to school, home, and community conditions, and therefore, easier to change in the short term” (p. 52).

Keith and Keith (1993) introduce the term *reciprocal effects*, meaning success breeds success. Epstein (2001) explains that improved home-school communication may positively affect parents' informational interactions with their children in the short term. Communication between home and school regarding, for example, the practice of parents reading at home with children may first affect the family's focus on reading. If the family-school partnership communication continues to loop positively, then over time, as "families continue to influence or reinforce student attitudes, behavior, or motivation, . . . student learning may improve" (p. 51).

In this manner, parent involvement may not lead immediately to improved student achievement as measured by test scores or grades. Such measures of achievement may improve over time in relation to improved parent-school partnerships, but Epstein (2001) emphasizes that other measures of achievement exist that may better indicate students' school success in the short term, such as: behavior, attendance, attitudes, and other favorable effects on families. As positive effects of parent-school partnerships may correlate with academic achievement or other forms of success, a brief section regarding each will be summarized here.

Academic achievement effects. In their meta-analysis of middle level parent strategies that promote achievement, Hill and Tyson (2009) describe a research base that does not effectively delineate between elementary effects and middle level effects. They assert, "It is imperative to identify the extent to which parental involvement in education is positively related to achievement for middle school students and which types of involvement are the most effective" (p. 741). For this reason, and to address the purpose of this study proposal, the effects research reviewed here will be limited to studies of parent-school partnerships at middle level. Hill and Tyson challenge Fan and Chen's (2001) characterization of parent-school partnership models as being so diverse that it is a difficult to make comparisons. In the tradition of Epstein,

Hill and Tyson neatly divide parent-school partnerships into two major categories: school-based involvement (including Epstein's type three, volunteering) and home-based involvement (including Epstein's type four, learning at home). Their meta-analysis found a strong relationship between home-based involvement and student achievement and a positive, but weaker, relationship between school-based involvement and student achievement.

In my review of empirical studies correlating parent-school partnerships with academic achievement, this same interesting pattern emerged. With the exception of several studies that found positive correlations between academic achievement and Epstein's type two, communication (Jesse, Davis, & Pokorny, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996), all other studies correlating parent-school partnerships with student achievement were studies of the effects of Epstein's type four, learning at home.

In these studies, academic achievement was measured by standardized test scores, grades, criterion referenced tests, or grade point averages. Epstein's type four, learning at home (usually characterized as parents involved in homework), was consistently found to correlate positively with student academic achievement (Balli, Wedman, & Demo, 1997; Cai, Moyer, & Wang, 1997; Hawes & Plourde, 2005; Keith & Keith, 1993; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Van Voorhis, 2001, 2003).

One final aspect of parent-school partnerships correlated positively with academic achievement: perceptions and motivational influences. This psychological approach discussed in the previous section about parent-school partnership theory was the focus of several studies that found positive correlations between parent aspirations and/or perceptions and student achievement (Cai, Moyer, & Wang, 1997; DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, & Duchane, 2007; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994; Singh et al., 1995). A literature review by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001)

makes the connection between Epstein's type two (learning at home) and perceptions and motivational influences: "Parental involvement in children's homework appears to influence student outcomes because it offers modeling, reinforcement, and instruction that supports the development of attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors associated with successful school performance" (p. 203).

Beyond academic achievement. It was stated in the previous section that Hill and Tyson (2009) found a less robust correlation between Epstein's type three, volunteering, and student achievement than the stronger positive relationships with Epstein's types two or four, and the perceptions and motivational influences. The second half of this pattern of interest is that measures other than that of academic achievement correlate with Epstein's type three, volunteering.

Rather than academic achievement effects, Hoy and Hannum (1997) found that "expressive outcomes [such] as self-concept, creativity, and citizenship" (p. 307) correlated positively to school-based involvement of parents. Improved student behavior was found to have a positive relationship with parental participation in school activities (Epstein, 2007; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Keith & Keith, 1993, Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Mukuria (2002) emphasized the importance of parent-school partnerships as a deterrent to student misbehavior, as measured by suspension rates.

Improved attendance was found to be another aspect of expressive outcomes that correlated to parent volunteerism in schools (Epstein, 2007; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). Other positive effects of parent volunteering included increased student appreciation of art (Epstein & Dauber, 1995) and social competence and school adjustment and engagement of middle level students (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003).

In general, positive effects for schools and families including improved school climate, shared goals, and improved relationships between parents and teachers were also found to correlate with Epstein's type three, volunteering (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004). Hoy and Hannum (1997) express a related concept,

Achievement is only one facet of effective schools, albeit a highly visible one. We do not equate high student achievement with school effectiveness. Although achievement is one aspect of school effectiveness, it is not the whole of it. . . . For example, quality schools are also concerned with the social-emotional development of their students. Well-adjusted students who are happy, believe in themselves, like school, value education, and respect others are significant school outcomes. (p. 307)

While Hoy and Hannum are referring to school effectiveness with regard to middle schools, this is appropriately extended to the positive effects of parent-school partnerships that are not related to academic achievement. According to Hoy and Hannum, these expressive outcomes are as important as academic achievement.

Recommendations for principal practice for parent-school partnerships. Specific recommendations for principal leadership regarding parent-school partnerships were first articulated by Epstein (1987a) based on a large quantitative study of teachers, parents, and principals of 16 Maryland school districts. Epstein's findings led her to conclude:

[The] lack of active administrative leadership and attention [to parent-school partnership practices in their schools] is due, in part, to the dearth of useful, organized information on parent involvement in schools. . . . There are many real problems associated with parent involvement, and solving them takes time and perseverance. Yet, it is the administrator's role to orchestrate activities that will help the staff study and understand parent involvement, and to select or design, evaluate, and revise programs for parent involvement. (p. 120)

Epstein's concept of a parent involvement typology was introduced along with specific recommendations for principals linked to each of the four fledgling types. Now formalized as *Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement for Comprehensive Programs of Partnership* (Epstein et al., 2009, p. 16), Epstein's categories serve here to bound recommended principal

practices and initiate this review of recommendations for principals. The six types are listed first using the current formalized wording (Epstein et al., 2009) followed in brackets by the original wording that dates back to the first time all six types were identified (Epstein, 1992, pp. 11-14). Finally, Epstein's (1987a) recommendations for principals are quoted under the appropriate type (for only the first four types that existed at that time).

Type 1—Parenting [Basic obligations of families]

- Administrators can communicate the school's concern for family welfare and the willingness to help discreetly the families who need assistance in providing for their children's needs and requirements. (p. 121)
- Administrators and teachers often remind or advise parents of their responsibilities to prepare their children for school. (p. 121)
- Administrators at all levels of schooling can help parents continue their child-rearing obligations that prepare the children and support the schools by frequently communicating to parents the school's expectations for parental actions and assistance and by establishing lines of communication for parents with questions. (p. 123)

Type 2—Communicating [Basic obligations of schools]

- School administrators can influence the form, frequency, and likely result of information sent from the school to the home. They can influence whether the information can be read and understood by all parents . . . whether parents can work with the school administration and teachers if their children's attendance, grades, conduct, and course work are not satisfactory. (p. 123)
- Teachers can be encouraged to phone parents who cannot read well, or to send notes through the mail to parents whose children are unreliable couriers. (p. 123)
- Administrators can assure the success of open houses by discussing with teachers the purpose of the open house and by organizing it to make the best educational use of the teachers' and parents' time; by requiring the attendance of all teachers; and by requiring and reviewing materials prepared by teachers to provide information to parents on course objectives, special programs, or school policies, including parent involvement. (p. 124)
- It is the administrator's responsibility to create or support policies to inform parents, students, teachers, and others in the community about the school, and to exercise

leadership in supporting or changing district and school policies for parent-teacher conferences and open houses. (p. 124)

Type 3—Volunteering [Involvement at school]

- The structure of the parent organization can be influenced by the school administration and staff, and should reflect the school's goals to involve some or all parents. (p. 124)
- Administrators may be able to extend the number of parents active at school by encouraging all parents as volunteers, not just small cliques of parents who are already motivated. (p. 125)
- [E]arly each year, administrators could canvass parents to learn if and how they want to help at school or at home. This would provide an annual account of parental resources available to teachers. (p. 125)
- When parent involvement at the school is well organized, administrators communicate to parents that they are welcome and appreciated, and that they can help teachers and the school staff provide better educational services to the students during the school day. (p. 125)

Type 4—Learning at Home [Involvement in learning activities at home]

- Principal leadership was particularly important for the teachers' development of workshops for parents. Teachers may be required to obtain their principals' assistance in obtaining a room, materials, secretarial help, or custodial services. (p. 126)
- [T]eachers may respond to principals' encouragement to plan and conduct workshops. (p. 126)

Type 5—Decision Making [Involvement in decision making, governance, and advocacy]

In 1987 Epstein had developed only the first four types of involvement, so no recommendations for administrators were made in this not yet extant type. The principal leadership literature in this review, however, includes much guidance related to type five.

Type 6—Collaborating With the Community [Collaboration and exchange with community organizations]. (Epstein et al., 2009, p. 16)

Type six was also added at a later date, but will not be discussed in this review, as it is not pertinent to this study. It is included here simply to complete *Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement for Comprehensive Programs of Partnership*.

Recommendations from scholars of principal leadership for parent-school partnerships continued to emerge following Epstein's lead, many of which were based on Epstein's *Framework of Six Types of Involvement*. Those that add an additional dimension to her work, as well as some of Epstein's later recommendations, are discussed here. It is important to note that many of these recommendations are not empirically based, either coming from practitioner journals or peer-reviewed journals in the form of literature reviews. Recommendations from empirical studies are distinguished from the others in the following summary of additional recommendations for principals. It is also important to note that all recommendations in this section (including Epstein's) are directed at principals in general—not specifically middle level principals, the unit of this study. Middle school principals are discussed in detail in the final section of this literature review. The parent-school partnership literature regarding principals narrows greatly when delimited to middle school principals. The final section of this review of literature focuses on middle level: leadership, parent-school partnership, and transition. As will be seen, the discussion is primarily regarding barriers to parent-school partnership at middle level and the challenges of the period of transition, thus establishing the research gap and the need to study principals who foster exemplary partnerships at the time of transition.

The most frequently cited recommendation for principals is to provide leadership for two-way communication between parents and school, also known as reciprocity. Communicating is actually the second type in Epstein's framework. It is repeated here only because it has emerged as a more frequent recommendation than any other. One empirical study in this area added to the research base. In their study about principal perceptions of teacher-parent relations, Flynn and Nolan (2008) concluded that teacher-parent communication needed improvement and that it was the principal's role to foster those alliances through teacher professional development aimed at

overcoming obstacles of attitudes and beliefs. Other voices, in the form of articles for practitioners, book syntheses, or literature reviews concurred (Burke, 2001; Clark & Clark, 2005; Davies, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Williams & Chavkin, 1989).

Professional development for teachers stems directly from this recommendation for reciprocal communication between home and school. As was already noted, Flynn and Nolan (2008) advocated for principal leadership in teacher professional development for the purpose of improving reciprocal communication between parents and teachers. Chavkin and Williams (1987) surveyed parents and school administrators regarding parent involvement, concluding that administrators should provide resources, including teacher professional development, to support the implementation of effective parent involvement efforts. Epstein et al. (2009) recommended the redefining of staff development based on their past research and their action team approach. The action team (or partnership team) approach was also recommended by Van Voorhis and Sheldon (2004) in their empirical study. Agreement regarding the importance of principal leadership for teacher professional development was noted by additional non-empirical sources (Burke, 2001; Epstein & Jansorn, 2004; McAfee, 1987; Myers & Monson, 1992; Williams & Chavkin, 1989).

Similarly, parent training was named as a way for principals to foster the parent-school partnership as described by Flynn and Nolan (2008) and Chavkin and Williams (1987) in their previously cited empirical studies. Parent training for partnership with schools was also advocated in the practitioner literature (Clark & Clark, 2005; Myers & Monson, 1992; Williams & Chavkin, 1989).

An important recommendation that was echoed by many voices involved a challenge inherent in the affective aspect of parent-school partnerships: the accessibility and openness of

the school to parents. Many accounts described less than friendly environments. There was broad-based agreement that recognition and praise for parents, friendly school environments, and accessible schools fostered parent-school partnerships. There were perceptions that parents, wishing to be accepted and respected by staff, respond poorly to excessive professionalism or patronizing attitudes. Again, these were all recommendations for principals from practitioner literature (Burke, 2001; Clark & Clark, 2005; Davies, 2000; Davis, 1989; Epstein & Jansorn, 2004; Ferrandino, 2004; Lindle, 1989; Myers & Monson, 1992).

Finally, there were many recommendations for strong principal leadership and initiative in the area of parent-school partnerships. Van Voorhis and Sheldon (2004) engaged in a longitudinal study of 320 schools to explore the importance of the principal in the development of parent-school partnership programs. Their findings quite simply state, “[P]rincipals hold the key to initiating programs and processes” (p. 66). Their recommendation that “future studies could build on the findings of the present study by looking more closely at specific practices of supportive principals in schools with excellent partnership programs” (p. 67) is specifically linked to this study. Strong principal initiative was named as a crucial factor for the success of parent-school partnerships in numerous literature reviews and practitioner journals (Burke, 2001; Clark & Clark, 2005; Davies, 2000; McAfee, 1987; Rutherford & Billig, 1995; Williams & Chavkin, 1989).

Principal Leadership in Relation to Parent-School Partnerships

Importance of the principal, in general. Principal leadership matters. Widespread agreement among scholars holds that the principal is in a unique position to influence, facilitate, and lead all that occurs in schools (Fullan, 2001; Gronn & Ribbons, 1996; Marzano, Waters &

McNulty, 2005; Rosborg, McGee, & Burgett, 2006; Shipman, Queen, & Peel, 2007, Williams-Boyd, 2002). Houts (1976) quotes Barth as emphasizing this accepted view, “It is not the teachers, or the central office people, or the university people who are really causing schools to be the way they are or changing the way they might be. It is whoever lives in the principal’s office” (p. 21). This perspective resonates throughout subsequent years. Blumberg and Greenfield (1986) “[rediscover] the obvious” (1986, p. 4) in their assertion that “clearly building principals are critical figures in the life of a school . . . that the character of a school’s culture is largely influenced by its principal” (p. 4). A particularly heartfelt characterization from Wilmore (2002) proclaims the principal to be “the primary voice of the school . . . the chief proponent of the value of education . . . [and] the main educational facilitator of the learning community” (p. 5). In fact, government reports have corroborated the belief that the school principal is the “single most influential person in a school” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 5, referring to a 1977 U.S. Senate report) and “the single largest factor” in school success (Gronn & Ribbons, 1996, p. 459, referring to a 1995 report by the Chief Inspector for Schools in the United Kingdom).

Such pronouncements are ubiquitous and may, in fact, be expressions of agreed upon truth to scholars, politicians, and practitioners alike. As Williams-Boyd (2002) asserts, “The significance of the designated leader in the school cannot be minimized” (p. 35). Yet, according to Marzano et al. (2005), such assertions are not based on “a clear, well-articulated body of research spanning decades” (p. 6). Principal importance has been explored through the school effectiveness literature. Analyses of empirical studies regarding the role of the principal in school effectiveness have been perceived as equivocal, due to the lack of specificity regarding exactly *how* principals matter (Halinger & Heck, 1996; Marzano et al., 2005; Purkey & Smith, 1985).

Contemporary scholars focus less on *that* the principal is important than on *how* the principal may be effective (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Deal & Peterson, 2009; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2000, 2007, 2009; Seyfarth, 1999). This approach of studying what principals do in order to be effective is pertinent to this study. My focus on the middle level principal as the unit of study speaks to my acceptance of the importance of the principalship. My research design that focuses on the attitudes, purposes, and practices of principals for parent-school partnerships aligns with the research, described here, that explores what matters beyond the force of position.

While principal importance may be a function of the role itself for some and a function of effectiveness within that role for others, there is no disagreement among scholars about the complexity of the job. It is the complexity of the role and the *how* of principal effectiveness that connects the literature of principal leadership to the literature of parent-school partnerships and to this study. Educational organization theory provides the bridge between these literatures in the following section through a review of the theoretical search for an organizing metaphor to guide principal leadership practice. According to Hoy (1996), “Contemporary organizational theory and research can and should offer administrators a set of conceptual guidelines that help them solve the complex problems of practice” (p. 369).

Evolving perspectives and metaphors for school leadership. Parent-school partnerships were not a consideration for the first principals. This discussion traces early administrative influences and orientations through to the development of the metaphors of school as community and principals as community builders that, for the purpose of this study, serves to frame current thinking about the importance of parent-school partnerships and the principal’s role therein. A review of the historical, philosophical, and practical progression of the

principalship is synthesized in the section that follows in order to provide a philosophical basis for guidance of principal practice that furthers parent-school partnerships.

The principalship emerged in the mid-1800s as an essentially political position (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Brown, 2011; Wiles & Bondi, 1983; Williams-Boyd, 2002) and the concept of the school leader has continually changed and evolved through to the present. Each iteration of the orientation of the position has served to “focus practice and [offer] practitioners and researchers alike a framework for making sense of the work of school administration” (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002, p. 1). Shifts in focus from philosophy and religion (1800s) to the managerial perspective that centered around efficiency, scientific management, and functional administrative tasks (first half of the 20th century) to the behavioral sciences period (1946-1985) have been chronicled by educational historians who agree that these broadly defined periods are not rigidly bounded and that multiple perspectives are present throughout (Beck & Murphy, 1993; Bogotch, 2011; Brown, 2011; Callahan, 1962; Dantley, 2005; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Murphy, 2002a; Seyfarth, 1999; Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

The behavioral sciences period that began in the 1940s, categorized by Beck and Murphy (1993) as the decade of the “Democratic Leader” (p. 202), was significantly influenced by Dewey’s ideas that connect education with society. Dewey (1916) identifies education as “a social process” (p. 115) and introduces a line of thought that is foundational for the parent-school partnerships of today:

A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control. (1916, p. 115)

Dewey (1916) describes the school as “a [s]pecial [e]nvironment” (p. 22), by which he explains, “We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment. Whether we

permit chance environments to do the work, or whether we design environments for the purpose makes a great difference” (p. 22). Dewey stops short of creating a metaphor of school as community. Waller (1932) advances Dewey’s ideas by asserting that the school is “a social organism” (p. 445), although he believes “that it is an artificial social order built on the despotic principle and is in a state of perilous equilibrium” (p. 445), a line of thought that will be explored here in the context of social contracts and capital. As will be established in this discussion, it is from these beginnings that contemporary thought about the school as community emerged.

The behavioral sciences perspective of the mid-20th century diminished as most school-level leaders found themselves working in high accountability contexts due to the re-emergence of the prescriptive managerial perspective brought about by the educational reforms and policies of the 1980s (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Leithwood & Prestine, 2002). Beck and Murphy (1993) explain that most conceptions of leadership are influenced by factors that are “fundamentally noneducational in nature and national or international in scope . . . not . . . by concerns originating in schools” (p. 197). Instead, conceptions of principal leadership are shaped by the forces of accountability, economic crises, the responsibility of schools for preparing future workers, the nation’s changing social fabric, the onset of post-industrialism, and perhaps most importantly, transformational reform measures (Murphy & Beck, 1994).

In addition to outside forces, school leadership is also influenced by the very nature of schools as organizations (Davies, 1987). Schlechty (2005) expresses the need for schools to transform from “organizations in which the core business is producing compliance and attendance to organizations in which the core business is nurturing commitment and attention” (p. 18) and predicts that re-casting the organization of schooling will fundamentally alter relationships among students, parents, teachers, and principals.

Addressing school leaders, Davies (1987) opined that “the goals of schools as organizations are diffuse, multifaceted, and subject to widely varied interpretations” (p. 159). Fifteen years later Goldring and Greenfield (2002) echoed Davis’s concern: “Leadership in education is an ambiguous and complex concept, and the diffuse and highly fragmented nature of theory and research on school and school district administration and leadership reflects this conceptual fuzziness” (p. 1). Supporting this expressed encumbrance, reviews of effective leadership count more than 3,500 studies of characteristics and leadership style of principals that are research-based and identify more than 300 definitions of a school leader (Weller, 2004; Williams-Boyd, 2002). Dantley (2005) traces this glut to challenges created by the postmodernist (and its offshoot postpositivist) climate and repeated waves of accountability-based educational reform in the latter part of the 20th century.

The promulgation of leadership models was, and to an extent continues to be, the attempt of scholars and practitioners to address the full complexity of the endeavor of teaching and learning against the backdrop described here. Murphy (2002b) decried the state of a “profession [that] has been marked by considerable ferment as it has struggled to locate itself in a post-behavioral science era” (p. 65). The theoretical search was underway to re-culture school leadership, and in so doing, provide practical guidance for school leaders. Critics of this lack of coherence, also described by Gronn and Ribbins (1996) as “paradigm wars” (p. 452), sought to articulate, within the postpositivist context, pragmatic problem-solving concepts that incorporated the values of school communities (Begley, 1996; Dantley, 2005; Evers & Lakomski, 1996; Hoy, 1996).

Beck’s and Murphy’s (1993) comprehensive analysis that sought “a deeper and more penetrating understanding of the principalship” (p. 3) led them to look beyond the “micro-level

descriptions, to transcend discussions of how principals behaved on the job” (p. 3). Guided by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, the roots of roles in the microsystem were placed squarely in the macrosystem and its institutional structures. Beck and Murphy constructed meaning about being a principal through the metaphorical language found in the literature of educational administration throughout the broad periods defined previously.

The idea of school as community took hold in the 1990s, as evidenced in a 1993 speech given by Sergiovanni at the American Educational Research Association conference in which he supported a change in metaphor for schools that he believed would lead to much needed improvement in school leadership and its resultant effects. He recommended that schools no longer be thought of as “organizations,” but as “communities,” thus making “*relationships . . . the core focus in schools*” (Furman, 2002a, p. 1). Sergiovanni (1994) offers the following definition of the term *community*:

Communities are collections of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together binded to a set of shared ideas and ideals. This bonding and binding is tight enough to transform them from a collection of “I’s” into a collective “we.” As a “we,” members are part of a tightly knit web of meaningful relationships. (p. xvi)

He further explains why the metaphor of school as community works:

If we view schools as communities rather than organizations, the practices that make sense in schools understood as organizations just don’t fit. . . . The bonding together of people in special ways and the binding of them to shared values and ideas are the defining characteristics of schools as communities. (1994, p. 4)

In Murphy’s (2002b) quest to re-culture school leadership, he ultimately replaced the standing traditions with the synthetic paradigm of democratic community, which led him to the metaphor of *principal as community builder*. Beck (2002) further expands on the elegance of the community metaphor:

Community, it seems evokes an image of a complex and dynamic reality. Resisting simple or linear definitions, it nevertheless seems to be recognizable both by outside observers and by members living the experience of being in community. A recognition of

both the complexity and coherence of community as a construct can only assist scholars who desire to better understand this phenomenon. (p. 42)

From the 1990s to the present, as schools have been increasingly described as communities, the metaphors of school as community and leader as community builder have become widely accepted among scholars and practitioners (Block, 2013; Furman, 2002b; Haynes et al., 1996; Kochan & Reed, 2005; Lambert, 2003; Murphy, 2002b; Murphy & Beck, 1994; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009; Sergiovanni, 1994, 2000, 2007, 2009; Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2004; Williams-Boyd, 2002). It is under this conceptual umbrella that I place the middle level principal's role of fostering parent-school partnerships. In the following section, the somewhat broad metaphor of community builder is synthesized in such a way as to delimit the term for the purpose of this study and to connect it with the parent-school partnership literature guidance for principals.

Guidance for principals: A synthesis of the community builder metaphor. Echoing Dewey (1916), Sergiovanni (2000) is clear: "Schools need special leadership because schools are special places" (p. 165). He makes a case for the *specialness* of schools and school leadership based on their complexities that include political realities, relationships with governments, and relationships with communities at large that are unique when compared with other enterprises—and, most importantly, that "schools belong to parents and children" (p. 165). According to Sergiovanni (2000), such *special* places are values-intensive and covenantal, implying the importance of a trustworthy leader who understands that "[c]ovenantal communities have at their center shared ideas, principles, and purposes that provide a powerful source of authority for leadership practice" (p. 167).

Just as Dewey's work is foundational regarding democracy in schools, Tönnies' (1957, originally published in 1887) seminal sociological study of community and society has been

widely applied in contemporary scholarship and research about relationships in schools (Beck, 2002; Belenardo, 2001; Furman, 2002b; Putnam, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1994, 2007). Well before Waller (1932) developed his view of schools as social organisms, Tönnies (1957) introduced the theory of *Gemeinschaft* (community), a relationship “of mutual affirmation . . . conceived of . . . as real and organic life” (p. 33). Relationships of *Gemeinschaft* that apply to schools may be through bonds of locality or of mind. Conversely, the theory of *Gesellschaft* (society) is an artificial construct that takes an inherently negative approach, a precursor to Waller’s (1932) line of thought, assuming that tensions naturally exist among individuals, thus creating the need for the exchange of common goods that represent social values. These ideas are critical in understanding the synthesis that follows.

Working backward from current scholarship to these foundational theories, clarification of the broader discussion occurs and it becomes possible to synthesize the metaphors of school as community and school leader as community builder into three key components that are inherently interrelated: democratic organization, relationships, and communication or in Sergiovanni’s (2007) turn of phrase, “management of meaning” (p. 134). These key components, that may guide the thinking and practice of school leaders, dovetail neatly with the parent-school partnership literature. As stated in the preceding review of the parent-school partnership literature, parent-school partnership theorists affirm the value of democratic organization, relationships, and management of meaning, as well as additional components that serve to move the focus from theory to principal practice regarding parent-school partnerships, advancing this review closer to the purpose of this study.

Democratic organization. Contemporary expressions of democratic organization in schools are, in essence, Dewey redux. Definitions and descriptions of democratic organization

that are relevant to this review refer back to Dewey, just as the current postpositivist re-culturing of educational organization reprised metaphorical themes of the 1940s that, according to Beck and Murphy (1993), focused on “principal as democratic leader” (p. 34) and “a belief that democracy is practically and philosophically the best and most moral form of government” (p. 41).

Democratic communities, in this case schools, differentiate themselves from non-democratic communities by operating through structures and processes that promote a participatory way of life and support an open flow of ideas that contribute to the common good (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011; Furman & Starratt, 2002; Gawthrop, 1998; Kochan, & Reed, 2005; Reitzug & O’Hair, 2002). The moral dilemma of democratic communities is described by Reitzug and O’Hair (2002): “Democratic community is a specific type of community of mind [that is] . . . concerned with one individual’s or group’s interests not being pursued at the expense of other individuals’ or groups’ interests” (p. 123). For this reason, ethical and moral leadership is consistently cited as a critical element of the democratic organization (Furman & Starratt, 2002; Gawthrop, 1998; Kochan & Reed, 2005; Schlechty, 1997; Sergiovanni, 1992, 2000, 2007, 2009; Starratt, 1991; Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005).

According to Denhardt and Denhardt (2011),

Public administrators . . . do not seek to control, nor do they assume that self-interested choice serves as a surrogate for dialogue and shared values. In short, they must share power and lead with passion, commitment, and integrity in a manner that respects and empowers citizenship. (pp. 154-155)

Principals are charged with building structures and practices that support democratic ideals while addressing diverse individual and group values and voices (Bogotch, 2011).

According to Strike et al. (2005), “People’s interests must be respected and people must be able to influence decisions. . . . This argument does not justify democracy because it always makes

the best decisions, but because it makes decisions in a just way” (p. 108). While it may not be possible to implement democracy in its pure form in the school setting, Deal and Peterson (2009) assert, “Leadership at its best is shared, with everyone pulling together in a common direction” (p. 199).

Marked by agreeable circumstances among members, democratic organizations are the antithesis of bureaucratic, hierarchical structures (Glickman, Allen, & Lunsford, 1994; Reitzug & O’Hair, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2000). Principals of democratic schools find ways to make permeable the boundaries between the structure of the school and its inhabitants. Dewey (1916) praised the democratic ideal for its “continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse” (p. 100). This introduces the all-important aspect of voice, which includes: ongoing informed critique of community norms and values, the right of all participants to have a respected and equitable voice in matters that affect them, and open dialogue (Furman & Starratt, 2002; Kochan & Reed, 2005; Murphy, 1994; Reitzug & O’Hair, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2000; Strike, 1993).

Leading the practice of democracy in schools can be problematic and risky for principals (Furman, 2002b; Furman & Starratt, 2002; Glickman et al., 1994; Reitzug & O’Hair, 2002). As democracy tends to be disorderly, principals may revert to imposing structures that are not democratic, especially, according to Kochan and Reed (2005), when the democratic process “actually reinforces traditional power structures and disenfranchises the groups it purports to serve” (pp. 77-78). Brooks and Kensler (2011) explain that “there is little clear consensus on just what it means to be a democratic organization or how an organization effectively addresses challenging paradoxes of structure (the ‘architecture of participation’ as spontaneous or formalized, adaptive or pragmatic)” (p. 59).

Based on their study of four schools that were restructured according to democratic principles, Peterson and Warren (1994) conclude that such restructuring “has made the principal’s role more demanding, more uncertain, and more complex, demanding increased skills in analyzing complicated and at times perplexing political situations and requiring new understandings of decision making shared power, and conflict resolution” (pp. 234-235). The widely recommended antidote for this leadership paradigm shift is collaborative, inclusive, and constructivist leadership styles (Furman & Starratt, 2002; Kochan & Reed, 2005; Reitzug & O’Hair, 2002; Schlechty, 1997; Sergiovanni, 2000).

Relationships. In a study of principals from highly successful middle level schools, Valentine et al. (2004) found that such schools were consistently characterized as having high quality relationships among all members of the school community and that the norms and supports for such relationships were established by the principal. School as community has been described as an interactive web of partnerships and networks that includes the principal as a member (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Kochan & Reed, 2005; Murphy & Beck, 1994). Prestine (1994) expresses that this complexity within *school as community* creates identity through “the intricate mosaic of relationships, processes, and understandings that define and give meaning to . . . [a] sense of itself as a school” (p. 145). Some view the principal as the lead player (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Goldring, 1993; Prestine, 1994), while Sergiovanni (2000) envisions “a new hierarchy . . . one that places ideas at the apex and principals, teachers, parents, and students below as members of a shared followership that is committed to serving these ideas” (p. 24). In this way, Sergiovanni affirms Tönnies’ concept of *Gemeinschaft* (community) regarding the bonds of locality, mind, and even “a unity that is similar to that found in families and other close-knit collections of people” (p. 66).

Whether viewed as leader or lead follower, the principal as community builder cannot support relationships without trust. Researchers consistently identify trust as a significant factor in relationship building (Cope, 1998; Glickman et al., 1994; Haynes et al., 1996; Kochan & Reed, 2005; Mawhinney, 2002; Sergiovanni, 2007). As Putnam (2000) vividly puts it, “Trustworthiness lubricates social life” (p. 21). Trust undergirds social contracts, which are the basis for covenantal communities (Sergiovanni, 1992). The ideals of *Gemeinschaft*, the strong sense of bonding that can occur in relationships, are the other side of the coin when considering social contracts. It is Tönnies’ concept of *Gessellschaft* (society) that forms the basis for contemporary understandings of the need for social contracts in maintaining the lubrication of social life so clearly described by Putnam.

Coleman’s (1990) seminal work regarding social systems is often cited for its explanation of social capital. Coleman credits Loury for introducing the concept of social capital in the field of economic theory and extends this concept to the field of sociology through this reasoning:

Just as physical capital is created by making changes in materials so as to form tools that facilitate production, human capital is created by changing persons so as to give them skills and capabilities that make them able to act in new ways. Social capital in turn, is created when the relations among persons change in ways that facilitate action. Physical capital is wholly tangible, being embodied in observable material form; human capital is less tangible, being embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual; social capital is even less tangible, for it is embodied in the *relations* among persons. (p. 304)

Coleman continues:

The public-good aspect of most social capital means that it is in a fundamentally different position with respect to purposive action than are most other forms of capital. Social capital is an important resource for individuals and can greatly affect their ability to act and their perceived quality of life. (p. 317)

The linked concepts of trust, social contract, and social capital have been popularized in contemporary educational organizational and sociological thought (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2011; Mawhinney, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1992, 2007). As Sergiovanni (2007) states,

“Trust has more than personal qualities. It is a key ingredient in the development of social capital” (p. 135). Social capital resides in relationships, therefore it is a concept of significance for principals as community builders.

Management of meaning (communication). As discussed in the parent-school partnership literature section, communication, particularly two-way communication or *reciprocity*, is a universally recommended component of such partnerships. The principal leadership literature strand also finds this to be important, however like the other two components (democratic organization and relationships) that have been synthesized from the school leader as community builder metaphor, the leadership literature takes a more philosophical approach, while the parent-school partnership literature typically addresses specific practices.

Sergiovanni (2007) identifies eight basic competencies for a principal who is a community builder, one of which is coined “management of meaning” (p. 134, credit given to Bennis, 1989). Woven throughout Sergiovanni’s writings is the conviction that participation in school as community is rewarding for intrinsic reasons and that “what is rewarding gets done” (1992, p. 58). He expounds on the importance of the school leader’s mastery of the management of meaning because of its potential for creating value among community members and for the community as a whole:

The management of *meaning* is the ability to connect teachers, parents, and students to the school in such a way that they find their lives useful, sensible, and valued. Even the mundane routines of schools are valued and are connected to the larger purposes and meanings that define who people are, why they are in the school, why the school needs them, and why their participation with the school is worthwhile. . . . These messages help people become connected to each other and to the school, building hope and commitment and raising levels of civility and academic engagement. (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. 135)

The principal as community builder will model active participation in a dialogical community, reciprocity and spirit of interdependence, open sharing of knowledge, empathetic

listening skills, debate for the common good, and will provide a variety of ways for voices to be heard ranging from formal committee structures to spontaneous interactions (Fullan, 2001; Furman & Starratt, 2002). Tusting (2005) explains that “language . . . has a privileged place in human communication” (p. 40) because of its power in negotiating social relationships and identities. Opportunities for competing interpretations or miscommunication abound, therefore the principal who builds community will thoughtfully serve the goal of managing meaning when facilitating the frequency and quality of communication among all community members (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Haynes et al., 1996). Furman and Starratt (2002) strongly encourage principals to lead the process of democratic participation by “thinking aloud together” (p. 117).

Sergiovanni (2000) addresses the complexity and difficulty of change in a school community. This point is of particular importance during the transition from elementary to middle level. The principal’s skill in helping parents negotiate this period of change has the potential to frame the fear of the unknown in welcoming terms that replace the unknown with positive meaning. In his discussion of the re-culturing of schools, Sergiovanni describes how a parent coming from a familiar, existing elementary culture may feel:

Perhaps things would be different if it were possible to move instantly from one set of meanings to another. It is the period in between that often causes the difficulty. Changing a culture requires that people, both individually and collectively, move from something familiar and important into an empty space. And then, once they are in this empty space, they are obliged to build a new set of meanings and norms and a new cultural order to fill up the space. Deep change, in other words, requires the reconstructing of existing individual and collective mindscapes of practice. (p. 148)

Formalization of professional standards for school leaders regarding parent-school partnerships. During the 1990s when the previously described re-culturing of educational organization was occurring, ultimately incorporating the metaphors of school as community and school leader as community builder, professional standards for school leaders were established to provide practical direction for educational administrators based on research at the intersection of

school leadership and effective schools. The Council of Chief State Officers (1996) developed the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, as the result of an initiative that included the Council of Chief State Officers (comprised of 24 member states), the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), and a host of professional associations (1996). According to Murphy, Yff, and Shipman (2000), leaders of this endeavor sought to “describe school leadership for the 21st century by using metaphors that portray fundamental shifts in our conception of school administration, metaphors that convey changes from what leadership is today to what leadership needs to be in tomorrow’s schools” (pp. 18-19). The metaphors of leader as community servant, organizational architect, social architect, and moral educator informed the structure and content of the standards.

The 1996 ISLLC standards were designed for use not only as direction for principal practice, but also as standards for licensure, certification, evaluation, selection, and professional development of educational administrators. These standards for school leaders were widely accepted in states throughout the country, therefore NPBEA worked with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) to bring its principal preparation program standards, the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards, in line with the ISLLC standards in 2001. The revised ELCC standards, in essence a reformatting of the ISLLC standards, have the added characteristic of being performance-based. In 2008 the ISLLC standards were updated in the form of policy standards (Council of Chief State Officers, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2009; Shipman et al., 2007). The Council of Chief State School Officers, now expanded to include the Department of Defense Education Activity and five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions, has once again released updated ISLLC standards, this time in *draft for public comment* form (Council of Chief State Officers, 2014).

These educational administration standards are relevant to this discussion of the role of the principal with regard to parent-school partnerships because each iteration has included a focus on the principal's function regarding the parent-school partnership. Following is the latest version of the Council of Chief State Officers' (2014) ISLLC standard 7, *Communities of Engagement for Families*:

An educational leader promotes the success and well-being of every student by promoting communities of engagement for families and other stakeholders.

Functions:

- A. Promotes understanding, appreciation, and use of the community's diverse cultural, social, and intellectual resources
- B. Nurtures a sense of approachability and sustains positive relationships with families and caregivers
- C. Builds and sustains productive relationships with community partners in the government, non-profit, and private sectors
- D. Advocates for policies and resources for the community
- E. Understands and engages with community needs, priorities, and resources
- F. Communicates regularly and openly with families and stakeholders in the wider community. (p. 19)

When the focus on parent-school partnerships emerged in the 1980s, practical and policy direction for principals did not yet exist. That one of 11 standards for school leaders is now devoted to building community is a meaningful indication of the acceptance and formalization of the place of parent-school partnerships in contemporary leadership functions. While the current policy approach adds leverage regarding performance expectations, this version eliminates the powerful language of the Council of Chief State Officers' (1996) ISLLC standard four (of six) that had set forth the following dispositions for principals:

The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to:

- schools operating as an integral part of the larger community
- collaboration and communication with families
- involvement of families and other stakeholders in school decision-making processes
- the proposition that diversity enriches the school
- families as partners in the education of their children
- the proposition that families have the best interests of their children in mind
- resources of the family and community needing to be brought to bear on the education of students
- an informed public. (p. 16)

Parent-School Partnerships in Transition to Middle Level

The time of transition from elementary to middle level has typically been documented regarding concerns of students, including: academics, school procedures, peer relationships, and safety. In addition, the decrease in positive feelings about self, participation in school activities, and sense of belonging in middle school among some students as compared to elementary school has been well documented (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Blyth, Simmons, & Bush, 1978; Cauley & Jovanich, 2006; Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Morgan & Hertzog, 2001; San Antonio 2004). Entwisle (1990) identifies transitions as “critical periods for students because they are points of maximum discontinuity and change” (p. 215).

Although the vulnerability of early adolescents is not universal during the transition from elementary to middle school, there is evidence in the literature that supports students’ (and their parents’) concerns. In addition to a decrease in positive feelings about self, participation in school activities, and sense of belonging in middle school as compared to elementary school,

academic achievement and long-term school success can be affected (Blyth, et al., 1978; Grolnick et al., 2000).

The period of early adolescence and middle school transition for children presents corresponding challenges for parents. Parents experience their child's transition from elementary to middle school in ways that may affect their ability to effectively partner with the middle school. They may be unfamiliar with new procedures and norms of the school. They may be unclear about their changing role as the parent of an early adolescent. While parents' concerns often mirror those of their children (e.g., ability to adjust to new classmates and feel accepted), parents may experience an even more disturbing set of worries, such as the possibility of peer pressure regarding drugs, gangs, or sex. Parents may be anxious about the workload and their child's ability to succeed academically in middle school and, therefore, the future (Yuen, 2007).

This last literature, parent-school partnerships in transition to middle level, is not a discrete literature, but rather a conglomeration of middle school philosophy, parent-school partnerships specific to middle level, the vulnerability inherent in the transition period, and ultimately the role of the middle level principal in fostering parent-school partnerships during the transition. It all comes together here in the research gap. The rich literature of parent-school partnerships and principal leadership narrows to this distinct point in time about which little is known regarding the role of the principal.

I begin broadly with an overview of middle level history and philosophy. Then, the overlap of middle school literature and parent-school partnership literature provides an understanding of the barriers to parent-school partnerships during middle level. The focus is, then, delimited to the period of transition from elementary to middle level and the role of the middle school principal with regard to parent-school partnerships at this vulnerable time. As the

middle school principal is the unit of study, this section of the literature review concludes with the clarification of the study's purpose and question, leading to the methods of the study.

Middle level philosophy: An historical overview. A brief overview of the middle school movement elicits meaningful connections between the literatures of parent-school partnerships and middle level education when viewed in tandem. By the 1960s, the traditional structure of the junior high school had come under scrutiny for failing to serve the unique characteristics and needs of early adolescents. This structure had not become the envisioned bridge between childhood and adolescence (Reinhartz & Beach, 1983). The number of middle schools increased dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s. According to Alexander and McEwin (1989), by the end of the 1980s, schools structured according to the middle school model had increased by more than 200 percent, while junior high school configurations had decreased by 53 percent. Attention to the development of early adolescents and their schooling proliferated during this time (Alexander and George, 1981; Alexander, Williams, Compton, Hines, & Prescott, 1968; Blyth et al., 1978; Children's Defense Fund, 1988; Coleman, 1980; George & Alexander, 1993, Weller, 2004). Simultaneously, researchers began to question the 1950s approach of separate roles for schools and parents, as described in the preceding section on parent-school involvement theory. The middle school movement gained strength concurrently with the parent-school partnership movement.

Human development research began to emphasize the importance of early adolescence as a unique phase of growth. Clark and Clark (1994) share the spreading belief of the time: "Most scholars and practitioners agree that middle level schools should exist for one purpose, and one purpose only, to be developmentally responsive to the special needs of the early adolescent

learner” (p. 4). According to Wiles and Bondi (2006), educators came to understand that a particularly appropriate educational rationale for middle level students,

promot[ed] exploration . . . [to enable] each student, in growing up, to come to understand himself or herself and his or her place in the world. Middle schoolers are by nature curious, and school should represent a place where they can seek and think in a controlled and caring environment. (pp. 20-21)

It was the groundbreaking report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) that combined the research on early adolescent development and schooling with the increasingly important focus on parent involvement in children’s schooling. Eight recommendations by this task force set the middle school stage for years to come. Among these “turning points” was the charge that schools:

Reengage families in the education of young adolescents by giving families meaningful roles in school governance, communicating with families about the school program and student’s progress, and offering families opportunities to support the learning process at home and at the school. (p. 9)

Legislation then began to echo the research findings of the 1960s through the 1980s. The year 1984 saw the first national symposium on parent partnerships in education, and in 1988, the *Educational Partnerships Act (Title VI)* was passed. The U.S. Congress’ (1994) *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* mandated parent participation through the following legislation:

By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children . . . every school will actively engage parents and families in a partnership which supports the academic work of children at home and shared educational decision making at school.

The research-rich decades of the 1970s and 1980s brought increased understanding and awareness of both the middle school philosophy and the need for quality parent-school partnerships. Middle school and parent involvement researchers provided a broad theoretical and practical foundation that informed the topic of parent-school partnerships at the middle level.

Barriers to parent-school partnerships at middle level. Fuligni, Eccles, Barber, and

Clements (2001) set the stage:

Early adolescence begins a period of disengagement and distancing between children and their parents. . . . Children become increasingly influenced by their peers as they begin the transition into adolescence. This tendency peaks during the years of early adolescence and then gradually declines as children renegotiate their relationships with their parents and develop a mature sense of autonomy. (p. 28)

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) contrast this with the relationship parents have with younger children:

Striking this “developmental match” tends to be easier for parents of younger as compared to older and adolescent children. Because younger children are among the most generically enthusiastic about parental attention to themselves, their school work, and school accomplishments, numerous avenues for involvement present themselves as age- and child-appropriate. (p. 323)

Barriers to parent-school partnerships at middle level occur for a wide range of reasons. As was previously stated, the greater autonomy of early adolescents can prevent parents from engaging in parent-school partnerships (Burke, 2001). Sometimes as children age, families experience stressors such as time and energy constraints or economic difficulties that limit their ability to be involved at school (Eccles & Harold, 1996). Schools may not actively encourage parents to participate and parents may not feel comfortable, lacking confidence in how to best assist at the middle level (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1987a). A related issue is that parents may feel insecure about their ability to handle middle level work, especially if they have had little schooling themselves or unhappy schooling experiences, so they distance themselves from the middle school (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Flynn & Nolan, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

A particularly disturbing reason that some middle level parents do not engage in parent-school partnerships is that they do not feel welcome or wanted at school. Middle school teachers sometimes do not view parent involvement as important at middle level. They may not

encourage parents to become involved in assisting with homework or may perceive that parents are apathetic or lazy when, in fact, they just do not know how to participate. Middle level principals typically only call home to complain, usually about students' grades or behavior, or they may be too overwhelmed by daily responsibilities to be receptive to parents (Clark & Clark, 2008; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Flynn & Nolan, 2008). In fact, in a national study by Valentine et al. (2002) middle school principals rated the "turning point" to "reengage families of young adolescents" second to last of all of the turning points (with only "connect schools with communities" ranking lower). These are all examples of what Schlechty (2005) calls the "uneasy relationship between schools and parents" (p. 207).

There is hope, according to Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995):

Despite the challenges, a growing body of evidence suggests that parental involvement continues to hold significant educational and developmental benefits for children and adolescents (e.g., Dornbusch & Wood, 1989; Entwisle, 1990; Ritter, Mont-Reynaud, & Dornbusch 1993). If parental involvement is to be useful, however, it must 'fit' the changing developmental needs of the growing child and assume new forms that correspond to emerging needs at each level of development. (p. 324)

Elementary to middle level transition. In my review of the literature, I found only one definition of transition that relates directly to this study. Roth (1991) states, "Transition refers to the movement of students into and out of the middle level school and the planned programs that help to make this process effective" (p. 42). This definition is pedestrian at best, further establishing the research gap and the need for my study, which will describe the role of the principal during this amorphous period. Roth cites a study by Epstein and Mac Iver (1990) finding that an average of 4.5 transition activities were provided for students moving from elementary to middle level. The most common of these were: visits by elementary students to the middle school, articulation meetings by elementary and middle school principals, and

articulation meetings between elementary and middle school counselors. At no time in these definitions and descriptions are parents mentioned.

Epstein and Mac Iver (1990) hold much hope that effective transition processes will support parent-school partnerships. They explain that one of the purposes of articulation activities in transitioning from elementary to middle school is “to assure that children and families are better informed about the school program, requirements, procedures, opportunities and about students’ and parents’ responsibilities at the new level of schooling” (p. 28). Here parents are mentioned, but principals are not.

Such is the nature of the research gap that this study will address. In seeking to describe how nominated principals further exemplary parent-school partnerships at the time of transition from elementary to middle level, it is hard to find literature that puts all of these variables in one place. The remainder of this literature review addresses why parent-school partnerships are vulnerable at the time of transition from elementary to middle level and what specific recommendations exist in the literature for middle school principals in this regard.

Vulnerability of parent-school partnerships during the transition period. Epstein’s (1987b) *Overlapping Spheres of Influence* theory demonstrates that parent involvement decreases over time and is particularly weak during times of transition, as in elementary to middle school. The developmental stage of early adolescence creates strains on the parent-child relationship that contribute to a lack of clarity for parents and educators alike regarding the desired nature of parent-school relationships, especially as these relationships impact and support quality schooling at the middle level.

Epstein (2011) acknowledges that the influence of force A, time/age/grade level, tends to affect parent-school interaction at the middle level negatively. The greatest amount of overlap

between the spheres of home and school typically occurs from preschool through the second or third grades. Parent involvement techniques are used less frequently by middle school teachers. In fact, according to Epstein (2001), “Most teachers of older children ignore or discourage parental involvement. Along the time line, then, there is increasingly less overlap of family and school spheres” (p. 34).

Accepting the assumption that quality parent-school partnerships are a critical component of quality middle level schooling, then attention to the transition from elementary to middle school is warranted. Jackson and Davis (2000) capture the dilemma:

Will finger-wagging at middle grades parents stem the ebb tide of declining involvement in their children’s education? Not in this world. Like it or not, if schools want to reap the benefits of parent support to improve student learning, they will need to understand why the relationship between families and schools often weakens as children grow older and take steps to prevent it from occurring. (p. 197)

It is a common phenomenon to find that parents who have been active in their child’s education prior to the middle school level become inactive when their child reaches early adolescence. While parental involvement is consistently noted as a key characteristic of middle school philosophy and practice in the literature, Epstein and other researchers have observed the decrease in such involvement during the transition from elementary to middle school.

Dramatic declines in parental involvement are reported after each transition point from preschool to regular school, from elementary to middle school, and from middle to high school (Anfara, Brown, Mills, Hartman, & Mahar, 2001; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Studies indicate, however, that these declines are not fixed. For example, Epstein and Mac Iver (1990) cite a national survey of principals finding that middle schools that conduct strong transitional activities (e.g., inviting parents to visit the middle school while the children are still in the elementary grades) tend to continue more practices of partnership with families through the middle grades. Despite this ray of hope, it is clear, based on the numerous reports of

the decline of parent involvement as children enter middle school, that transition is a bounded, vulnerable period that calls for study and a leadership solution.

Recommendations for principals. As was stated in the earlier parent-school partnership literature of this review, general recommendations for principals regarding parent-school partnerships also apply to middle level principals. There are however, two aspects of middle level leadership that stand above the generalities. In addition to the general recommendations, scholars state that middle level principals distinguish themselves by engaging stakeholders (including parents) in shared decision-making. This highly democratic recommendation refers back to my synthesis of the principal as community builder and to Epstein's fifth type of parent involvement: decision-making—involvement in decision-making, governance, and advocacy (Clark & Clark, 2008; George & Alexander, 1993). The other area of note is that middle level principals are developmentally responsive. Anfara, Roney, Smarkola, DuCette, and Gross (2006) present another view of how middle school principals are unique, based on early adolescent development. They state that of all characteristics attributed to principals, only five are specific to the middle level principal:

1. Is committed to developmentally responsive middle level education.
2. Is thoroughly knowledgeable about middle level curriculum, programs, and practices.
3. Understands the unique nature of young adolescent learners.
4. Has a commitment to the centrality of the interdisciplinary team organization, and has the skills in scheduling and supervision to make them effective groups.
5. Has a compassionate understanding of the nature and needs of older children and young adolescents. (p. 7)

A qualitative study by Anfara et al. (2001) finds that parent involvement is valued by effective middle school principals. Little and Little (2001) actually describe the “exemplary

middle school principal as a school-community facilitator . . . [who] instills a sense of ownership, pride, and commitment in faculty, staff, students, and parents” (p. 36).

In addition to these few distinctions, several recommendations for specific transition practices have been made by scholars:

First, goal-setting and planning by a transition team comprised of both middle school and elementary educators and counselors is the foundation that defines the transition process. Some researchers recommend the inclusion of parents on such teams. Transition teams meet to articulate curriculum, school programs, and to create a plan for transition activities (Cauley & Jovanich, 2006; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Perkins & Gelfer, 1995).

Second, visits by elementary students and their parents to the middle school at the end of the year prior to entering middle school help to ease concerns and initiate communication with middle school staff. Students and parents engage in early orientations to learn about procedures that commonly cause concern such as: locker use, curriculum, schedules, building configuration (getting lost is a major concern), and meeting students from other feeder schools (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Potter, Schlisky, Stevenson, & Drawdy, 2001; Stewart, 1999).

Third, visits by new middle school students and parents immediately before or after the beginning of the school year provide immediate reassurance regarding procedures that are now in action. This is an important time to allay concerns and provide answers to specific questions. Teachers and administrators can ease the transition through welcoming attitudes and hands-on assistance (Blodget, 2003; Cauley & Jovanich, 2006; Epstein & Herrick, 1991; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991; Mizelle & Mullins, 1997; Stewart, 1999).

Fourth, communication is a key component of every theoretical parent-school involvement model reviewed in this dissertation. Specific recommendations in the literature regarding communication during the transition from elementary to middle school include face-to-face communication among parents, teachers, and students at articulation activities; written communication through newsletters, web pages, and other school-initiated informative pieces; and parent-initiated communication with teachers and administrators, as needed. The transition period presents educators with an opportune time to encourage parents to communicate often with the school, to have patience with the development processes of their early adolescents, and to become involved in the school culture. Of course, communication between parents and students and the school and students is expected and encouraged, as well (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Epstein & Herrick, 1991; Stewart, 1999; Yuen, 2007).

It is important to note that while principal leadership may be implied in these recommendations for the transition period, no comprehensive guidance for the principal exists regarding how to foster parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle school.

Summary

The research gap is clear: The literatures of parent-school partnership and principal leadership are rich, based on theory and steeped in practical recommendations for principal practice regarding parent-school partnerships. As has been described in the middle school transition literature, parent-school partnerships at middle level are characterized and hindered by barriers, and the period of transition from elementary to middle level has been identified as a time of vulnerability for parent-school partnerships. It has been well established in this literature review that parent-school partnerships matter at middle level and that the principal is the key

player who has the ability to provide initiative and leadership to further parent-school partnerships during the transition period.

A conceptual framework, based on the overlap of the literatures reviewed here, is introduced in chapter 3. This framework informs the methods of this study which, in turn, address the purpose of the study: to describe and understand how nominated middle level principals further exemplary parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle level.

Chapter 3

Methods

A narrowly circumscribed period, that of the transition from elementary to middle school, may be considered the setting for this study, although the actual temporal period may vary considerably from school to school. Research regarding this time of transition is scant, typically mentioned tangentially in relation to broader topics about middle level education. Research regarding the middle level principal's role in furthering parent-school partnerships during this time is similarly limited. The research gap presented here will perhaps someday be filled with ample, meaningful study that will build a research base in this to-date overlooked area. As there is much potential for learning, my choice is to begin by simply describing. The research design detailed in this chapter revolves around one purpose: to describe and begin to understand how nominated middle level principals approach and foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle school. My intent is to paint a rich picture of the thoughts and actions of principals, in this regard, through an exploration of their attitudes, purposes, and practices.

Research Design

Having focused extensively on the metaphors of leadership in the review of literature, it is perhaps appropriate to begin discussing my research design in terms of a metaphor. The uses and techniques of qualitative research have prompted much debate (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To clarify these techniques, Wolcott (2009) composed a graphic, metaphorical representation of qualitative research strategies in the form of a tree. His conception of major and minor branches, both connected and extending from one another, helped him to visualize the relative importance

and uses for various approaches. He was “surprised to discover that [he] had trouble finding a suitable place for *case study* on the tree. [His] problem was not that [it] did not fit *anywhere*, but that it seemed to fit *everywhere*” (p. 85). This led Wolcott to conclude that case study is most useful as a format for *reporting*, in other words, as the end product rather than as a specific strategy for *conducting* research. To suit my purpose of describing and understanding, the role of reporter appeals to me.

Moving from Wolcott’s rather aesthetic view of qualitative research to more concrete definitions of case study as a research strategy, Merriam (1998) recommends the use of case study when one’s intent is to gain in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon. She explains, “The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (p. 19). Merriam notes that the case study differentiates itself from other qualitative research strategies through its “intensive descriptions and analyses of a *single unit*” (p. 19) and its ability to work within frames from other disciplines. In the instance of my study the middle level principal is the unit of study, and educational leadership and sociology are the interrelated disciplines. Case studies can “attend to the constructs of society and socialization in studying educational phenomena” (p. 37).

Stake (1995) confirms the use of case study for deep understanding: “The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does” (p. 8). Yin (2014) also advocates for case study as the preferred method of inquiry when exploring phenomena that are within a contemporary, real-world context and the focus of the research questions posed are of a *how* or *why* nature.

Merriam (2009) further describes case study research through three special features that fit my purpose:

- “*Particularistic* means that case studies focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon” (p. 43).
- “*Descriptive* means that the end product of a case study is a rich, ‘thick’ description of the phenomenon under study” (p. 43).
- “*Heuristic* means that case studies illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study. They can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader’s experience, or confirm what is known” (p. 43).

Based on these descriptions and definitions, case study is the qualitative research strategy that fits my research purpose and my *how* question: *How do nominated middle level principals foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle school?*

Expanding on the overall intent of the descriptive case study, Merriam (1998) emphasizes the goal of producing a detailed account of the phenomenon under study. She draws upon the ideas of “Lijphart (1971) [who] calls descriptive case studies ‘atheoretical . . . entirely descriptive and mov[ing] in a theoretical vacuum . . . neither guided by established or hypothesized generalizations nor motivated by a desire to formulate general hypotheses’ (p. 691)” (p. 38). This description further guided my research design, as I neither began with a theoretical construct in mind, nor did I seek to establish one as a conclusion of my findings. The conceptual framework set forth in the following section is not an attempt to initiate a theoretical perspective, but rather is synthesized from the literature and used in a limited manner for the purposes of selecting participants, composing interview protocol, and as a starting point for data analysis (coding and themes).

Miles and Huberman (1994) and Yin (2014) describe the limits of a single case (more vulnerable: all eggs in one basket) and advocate for the multiple-case study design for the value of adding confidence to the findings. According to Yin, “The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust (Herriott & Firestone, 1983)” (p. 57). Researchers select participants in multiple-case studies either for the purpose of replication in order to strengthen findings or for the purpose of providing contrasting descriptions. Yin’s guidance on designing a multiple-case study is clear: “Any use of multiple-case designs should follow a replication, not a sampling, logic, and a researcher must choose each case carefully” (p. 63). Yin suggests that the number of cases in a multiple-case study be determined by the degree of certainty sought and the subtle differences that may emerge among cases. His suggestion of a minimum of six replications, with the caution that multiple-case studies require extensive amounts of time and effort, guided my decision to select six participants for this multiple-case study. In the instance of my study, my selection of like participants (nominated middle level principals who foster exemplary approaches to parent-school partnerships) allowed me to replicate my inquiry in order to describe a deeper sample pool. While my intention is not to generalize, through this replication I have aimed to uncover findings that describe patterns of interest to researchers and practitioners. As Merriam (1998) notes, “Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence policy, practice, and future research” (p. 19).

Conceptual Framework

Marshall and Rossman (2011) advocate the use of a conceptual framework in case study research as a way to frame and focus the research process, moving from research question,

through literature review, to planning for data collection and analysis. In this way, I constructed a conceptual framework that employs my synthesis of the principal leadership literature (deriving from educational organization theory) and the practices/behaviors and attitudes/beliefs of the parent-school partnership literature (deriving largely from sociology). As noted in chapter 2, the defining aspects of these literatures dovetail significantly. It is, therefore, useful for my conceptual framework to illustrate the key components of these literatures and their interrelationships.

The metaphor of *principal as community builder* is the umbrella under which the components of my conceptual framework are organized. The three major synthesized areas reviewed in chapter 2 that underpin the practice of the *principal as community builder*—democratic organization, relationships, and management of meaning—are the *bins* that I proposed would likely be in play in this study. As Miles and Huberman (1994) explain,

Any researcher, no matter how inductive in approach, knows which bins [intellectual categories] are likely to be in play in the study and what is likely to be in them. Bins come from theory and experience and (often) from the general objectives of the study envisioned. Setting out from bins, naming them, and getting clearer about their interrelationships lead you to a conceptual framework. (p. 18)

Democratic organization is the bin that includes structures and processes that promote a participatory way of life, the voice of constituents through the open flow of ideas, commitment to the common good, and the influence of constituents on decision-making. The bin of *relationships* is characterized by a web of partnerships/networks and trust that is supported by norms, and social contracts. *Management of meaning* (communication) is the bin that holds two-way communication (reciprocity) and the principal's ability to connect constituencies.

Within the overarching metaphor of *principal as community builder* lies the narrower role of *principal for parent-school partnerships*. Starting with Epstein's parent involvement typology that emerged from her seminal theory of *Overlapping Spheres of Influence*, I have nested parent-

school partnership recommendations for principals within the three *principal as community builder* leadership bins. Five of Epstein's six types are represented in my conceptual framework: Type 1, Parenting; Type 2, Communicating; Type 3, Volunteering; Type 4, Learning at Home; and Type 5, Decision Making. In addition contemporary theories beyond Epstein's typology, *Perceptions and Motivational Influences*, have also been included in this inner ring of recommendations from the parent-school partnership literature regarding the principal for parent-school partnerships. This depiction of the *principal for parent-school partnerships* is not intended to be a comprehensive inventory of all possible recommendations for principals, but rather is representative of the parent-school partnership literature.

The graphic representation of my conceptual framework (see Appendix A) depicts the *principal as community builder* bins of democratic organization, relationships, and management of meaning as interrelated (in fact, they often overlap). The nested ring that narrows the principal's role and breaks down the *principal for parent-school partnerships* into six distinct aspects is not arranged in any particular order or hierarchy. The conceptual framework simply depicts the narrower role of *principal for parent-school partnerships* as fitting neatly inside the broader vision of *principal as community builder*. Each of the six compartments within the principal for parent-school partnership ring may relate to any, or all, of the principal as community builder bins.

The most inner-nested structure that sits within the two outer rings described above, *Transition Practices*, represents the research gap. The limited recommendations in this most narrow area, as discussed in chapter 2, were not a result of depth of literature or articulated theory, unlike the rich literature of the *principal as community builder* and *principal for parent-school partnerships* sections of the framework. These few recommendations are, therefore,

omitted from the conceptual framework. It is the purpose of this study to describe and understand the practices, purposes, and attitudes of the principal who fosters exemplary parent-school partnerships during the transition from elementary to middle level and, thereby, add to the literature regarding this research gap. While my synthesis of the *principal as community builder* and all six parent-school partnership compartments are noted in the literature, they have not previously been related directly to the role of the principal during the period of transition from elementary to middle level.

Advice from Miles and Huberman (1994) has informed the expression of my conceptual framework. Graphic representations are preferable to textual descriptions of conceptual frameworks because limiting the framework to one page “obliges you to specify the bins that hold the discrete phenomena, to map likely relationships, to divide variables that are conceptually or functionally distinct, and to work with all of the information at once” (p. 22). Having depicted my conceptual framework succinctly in a graphic representation, I have also further explicated the framework (see Appendix B) in order to provide necessary information to advance its purpose.

My conceptual framework with its structure of descriptive bins (nested and interrelated, based on my literature review) was designed for the purpose of informing my selection of participants and my composition of interview protocol and to provide a starting point for data analysis. As was stated in the previous section, this framework is not an attempt to initiate a theoretical perspective, rather it is simply intended to serve the purpose and question of this multiple-case study. My expectation that nominated principals who foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the transition from elementary to middle level were likely to express some of the interrelated aspects of my conceptual framework bins informed and justified this

starting point. This expectation did not preclude the likelihood that study participants would also describe outside-the-framework practices, purposes, and attitudes.

Data Collection

All aspects of data collection address the research question and the study's purpose to describe and understand how nominated middle level principals foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle level.

Creswell (2014) explains that, unlike the linear process of quantitative research, aspects of qualitative study may overlap. "While interviews are going on, for example, researchers may be analyzing an interview collected earlier, writing memos that may ultimately be included as a narrative in the final report, and organizing the structure of the final report" (p. 195). While acknowledging the iterative process of case study research, I will describe the process here in a broadly chronological manner, beginning with data collection followed by analysis and reporting.

Research protocol. Unlike with other qualitative inquiry strategies, case study protocol is more than an instrument. Yin (2014) explains:

First, the protocol contains the instrument but also contains the procedures and general rules to be followed in using the protocol . . . having a case study protocol is desirable under all circumstances, but it is essential if you are doing a multiple-case study. (p. 84)

The case study protocol increases the reliability of the research because it not only includes the interview questions (the instrument), but a conceptual framework, data collection procedures, and data analysis design. In other words, procedures and general rules to be followed are included in the protocol. It is this standardization and full disclosure of process that increases the reliability of the study. The protocol for my study is the main focus of this chapter and includes the following: procedures for selection of participants, written informed consent

documents, documentation of all fieldwork procedures and conduct, semi-structured interview questions, and data analysis procedures.

According to Yin (2014), a critical part of case study protocol is the employment of a pilot case study through which the researcher can hone questioning skills, test interview questions, and check the reliability of technology that will be used for recording interviews. The selection of a pilot case is a matter of convenience for the researcher in terms of time, place, and participant. The pilot inquiry can cover substantive and/or methodological issues, can help the researcher refine the protocol, and may help the researcher restructure interview questions to better align with the study's purpose and questions.

For my purposes, I employed a pilot study at the same time I was engaged in the participant selection process. In this way I was able to gain experience with my in-depth semi-structured interview process and my digital voice recorder in order to be ready to begin the study immediately after the selection of participants. As a former middle school principal, I was able to engage one of my colleagues as my pilot study participant.

Selection of participants. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), "Qualitative researchers usually work with *small* samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth. . . . Qualitative samples tend to be *purposive*, rather than random" (p. 27). In conceptualizing my selection of participants, I was guided by three studies I read while reviewing the literature for this study.

Blumberg and Greenfield (1986) studied eight school principals "who by reputation seemed . . . to be different somehow from many of their colleagues" (p. 4). For their study of effectiveness in school principals, they determined to employ the technique of the in-depth interview and to select their participants purposively. Their primary concern was reputation, so

they solicited nominations from teachers, principals, and university faculty colleagues to guide their selections.

In a more complex manner, Valentine et al. (2004) also used a nomination process to purposively select a sample of highly successful middle schools in the United States. Researchers contacted various leaders in education from all states requesting nominations of successful middle schools in their respective states. Nominators were asked to complete a web-based nomination form that requested specific descriptions of why the school was successful based on the conceptual framework of *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). The research team then contacted the principals of nominated schools explaining the study and inviting them to provide additional information, if they were interested in participating. Interested principals completed detailed forms, then a panel of educators knowledgeable in both middle level education and leadership rated these responses. Ultimately a sample set of 100 highly successful schools was selected for this study.

In his dissertation study of the principal's role in leadership and professional development for social justice, Kose (2005) began identifying participants through a "purposeful snowballing sampling technique" (p. 78) by soliciting nominations from professional acquaintances. This generated a pool of 40 principals who had been described by their nominators as "someone who promoted equity, inclusion, diversity and social justice" (p. 78). Kose contacted these principals to ascertain their willingness to participate in his study. Those who were interested participated in a prescreening interview of approximately 40 minutes. Candidate prescreening interviews were assessed according to a rubric that Kose developed based on his conceptual framework, and ultimately three participants were selected.

All three of these studies employed the type of sampling that Miles and Huberman (1994) call the “snowball or chain [which has the purpose of identifying] cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (p. 28). My sampling strategy for selection of participants in my study was informed by these studies and Miles’ and Huberman’s definition. I used the *snowball* or *chain* strategy to identify six Illinois middle level principals who foster exemplary approaches to parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle level.

My starting point was a posting on the Illinois Principals Association’s (IPA) PrinciPal Connection Digest in which I briefly described my study and requested nominations of middle level principals who foster parent-school partnerships in general, who provide transition from elementary to middle level support for parents, and who extend their parent-school partnership practice into this transition period (see Appendix C). The IPA PrinciPal Connection Digest is emailed daily to the IPA membership of administrators throughout Illinois, including but not limited to assistant principals, principals, assistant superintendents, and superintendents. In this posting I provided a link to a brief web-based questionnaire, as in the Valentine study.

A viable candidate pool was not immediately generated, so as planned, I pursued additional nominations through direct emails to middle school principals and their superintendents in Illinois school districts. These two avenues produced 22 anonymous nominations that could have been either nominations by self or nominations by another. Based on the strength of the nominators’ responses, I determined to screen all nominees.

At least two attempts were made to reach each nominee, first by telephone, with follow-up attempts made via either telephone or email. Nine of the nominees did not respond to these contact attempts. Three others spoke with me, but declined participation in screening due to work

obligations and time constraints. Ten potential participants agreed to participate in the screening protocol consisting of the approved questions (see Appendix D) and were later assessed by the approved rubric (see Appendix E). Of these, eight of the nominees remained strong possibilities for participation in this study based on the strength of their screening responses.

It is important to note that the rubric I designed is atypical in that the scoring is mainly non-numeric. I did not seek the highest scoring candidates based on a cut score. Instead, practice and attitude for each question was rated on a letter scale. I considered candidates with the most A scores (and next the most B scores) as falling in the high range for each screening question. Some screening questions more naturally favored one of the *Principal as Community Builder* bins; others covered multiple bins. Scoring then moved to the *Principal for Parent-School Partnerships* categories in order to gain focused insight into specific school practices identified in the literature. In other words, based on principals' expressed practices and attitudes, they received a greater or a fewer number of A, B, or C scores on a given question. The total number of letter scores provided only part of the guidance in my selection of participants. In using this rubric that was derived from my conceptual framework, my hope was that six middle school principals who were strong in the areas of *principal as community builder* and *principal for parent-school partnerships* would be identified.

As more than six strong candidates emerged, my final selection was also based on additional interest factors. The interest factors I considered beyond the strength of screening responses included: perceived enthusiasm of the nominees for the topic of this study, the range of professional experience of the principals, and the variance of school district and locality types. Findings in a study of like cases may not be generalized to the population of middle level principals, although naturalistic generalizations consistent with case studies may result. The

establishment of a wide range of participants, with regard to these additional interest factors, was in the service of mining the richest, most descriptive data possible from a pool of similar cases with regard to practice, yet varied cases with regard to demographic factors.

My invitation for participation in the study was accepted by all six of my final choices. Four regret letters (see Appendix F) were emailed per my IRB approved protocol. The fieldwork for this study, from selection of participants to the conclusion of the final interview, was conducted over three and a half months, all during the same University of Illinois semester.

Access and informed consent. After participants were selected and before fieldwork began, it was necessary to negotiate site access and interview dates, as interviews were scheduled at participants' schools. The informed consent form required by the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix G), was emailed to selected participants in advance of the first interview for their review. Each participant signed the form prior to the start of his or her first interview.

Ethical considerations will be covered more fully in a subsequent section on ethics and IRB. At this point I simply wish to acknowledge this step in the process, which involved my reaching "explicit agreements about shared expectations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 47) with participants. Miles and Huberman provide a list of typical questions for agreement with study participants:

1. How much time and effort will be involved?
2. What kind of data collection is involved (e.g., observation, interviewing, journal writing, life histories)?
3. Is participation voluntary?
4. Who will design and steer the study?
5. Will material from participants be treated confidentially?

6. Will participants' anonymity be maintained?
7. Who will produce descriptive and explanatory products?
8. Will participants review and critique interim and final products?
9. What benefits will accrue to participants—both informants and researchers? (p. 48)

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) raise additional concerns that participants may have regarding the research:

1. What are you actually going to do?
2. Will you be disruptive?
3. What are you going to do with your findings?
4. Why us?
5. What will we get out of this? (pp. 87-88)

Bogdan and Biklen recommend honest answers, but encourage researchers to be brief and avoid extensive specificity. It is important to assure participants of the importance of being non-disruptive. The potential audience of the dissertation may be shared. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), "As with all . . . design decisions, the agreements made with study participants about their participation, privacy, access to study reports, and benefits can make a large difference in the quality of analysis that is possible" (p. 49).

Forms of data. Yin (2014) names six commonly used sources of evidence in case studies: "documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts" (p. 105). His recommendation is for the researcher to use multiple sources in order to create a convergence of evidence around the research question.

The first two rounds of interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder, therefore my field notes were stored as MP3 files, first on my computer and flash drive, and later uploaded to my secure University of Illinois Box account. The third interviews were done via Skype, with the

exception of two that were recorded on the digital voice recorder via telephone. Audio recordings of the Skype interviews were saved as M4A files, stored on my computer and flash drive, and uploaded to my Box account.

My study involved two sources of evidence, interviews and documents, which will be discussed briefly.

Interviews. Seidman (2013) places the practice of interviewing on a continuum that ranges from “tightly structured” to “apparently unstructured” (p. 14). To meet the purpose and to answer the question of my study, the primary source of evidence was located between these continuum extremes. I employed the semi-structured interview, which is defined by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) as an interview that “seeks to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (p. 150). In the semi-structured format, I began with my prepared interview protocol (see Appendix H), then as Brinkmann and Kvale recommended, I will remained open and sensitive to cues by the participant that allowed the interview to proceed in such a way that my questions were not the sole focus, but were the starting point of a relationship that allowed the participant to explore his or her own thought processes.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) describe the “art of second questions” (p. 164) as critical for moving the interview ever closer to the purpose and questions of the case study. In order to be proficient in second questions or follow-up questions,

Decisions about which of the many dimensions of a subject’s answer to pursue requires that the interviewer have an ear for the interview theme and a knowledge of the interview topic, a sensitivity toward the social relationship of an interview, and knowledge of what he or she wants to ask about. (p. 165)

The goal is to elicit precise and nuanced descriptions of the phenomenon being studied.

My conceptual framework was the starting point for my interview protocol, but did not limit the interviews or analyses to fixed lines of inquiry. Each of the six participants participated in face-to-face interviews held at their school sites. The first round of interviews was scheduled for two hours, long enough to obtain in-depth, rich descriptive data about their practices, purposes, and attitudes regarding their roles as principals for parent-school partnerships at the time of transition from elementary to middle level. These initial in-depth interviews were followed a month later by a second face-to-face semi-structured interview at the participants' schools, also two hours in length (see Appendix I). The month between interviews allowed participants time to recall additional attitudes, purposes, and practices that were stimulated by the initial interview or by participants' ongoing practice and reflection. This second interview also provided an opportunity for member checking and clarification of responses from the first interview.

At this point in the process I developed questions (see Appendix J) for the third and final interview that took place one month after the second. This final round of interviews, which took place via Skype or alternatively by telephone, allowed for further exploration of topics that arose in the first two rounds and also provided an opportunity for clarification of previous interview responses.

Practical advice from Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) involves the careful use of technology. They recommend recording interviews on digital voice recorders, then transferring audio files directly to a computer for storage and ease of transcription, with the caveat that all technology use be piloted and practiced to prevent loss of data, which occurs most often through human error. An obvious advantage of audio recording is that the interviewer is freed to focus on

the topic of inquiry. Original data is accurately preserved and may be re-checked as needed (Seidman, 2013).

Documents. Participants in this study were asked to produce documents related to parent-school partnership activities and communication, particularly those that took place during and regarding the period of transition from elementary to middle level. Such documents were collected throughout the interview process and were included in the data analysis process as a form of member checking.

Yin (2014) cites the following strengths of documentation as a source of evidence:

- Stable – can be reviewed repeatedly;
- Unobtrusive—not created as a result of the case study;
- Specific—can contain the exact names, references, and details of an event;
- Broad—can cover a long span of time, many events, and many settings. (p. 106)

Potential challenges. Common potential challenges include participants who drop out of the study either before it starts (interfering with the selection process) or mid-study, participants who develop objections to the study, availability of participants, technical difficulties, and data loss. Stake (1995) advises the researcher to anticipate potential challenges throughout the data collection process, proactively prevent challenges by establishing relationships and trust with participants, work out protected record-keeping systems, establish clear case study protocol, and maintain accurate notes.

To this list, Seidman (2013) adds the fact that interviewing is labor intensive and may involve expenditures by the researcher (e.g., transcriptions, technical assistance). Yin (2014) poses potential challenges of sources of evidence. Interviews may not lead to accurate reporting if the participant says what he or she thinks the interviewer wants to hear. The constraints of this

study do not allow for verification of principals' attitudes, purposes, and practices beyond the self-reporting of participants. Also, poorly constructed questions may produce less than meaningful responses. Documentation may be irretrievable or deliberately withheld by the participant.

None of the more concrete of these challenges occurred during this study. No participants dropped out at any point or delayed the interview process in any way. Participants demonstrated enthusiasm throughout the process and were thoughtful in their responses and generous with their time. Other potential challenges named in this section remain possible, however the data collected in this study are not sufficient for ascertaining any response bias on the part of participants.

Data Analysis

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that,

Within the naturalistic paradigm . . . data are not viewed as given by nature but as stemming from an interaction between the inquirer and the data sources (both human and nonhuman). Data are, so to speak, the *constructions* offered by or in the sources; data analysis leads to a *reconstruction* of those constructions. (p. 332)

Stake (1995) emphasizes the connection between data analysis and the study's purpose and questions, advising the researcher to keep the purpose in mind as he or she analyzes data to "search for patterns, for consistency . . . within certain conditions [which he calls] 'correspondence'" (p. 78). The journey from the classification of raw data to the search for patterns and linkages ultimately results in conclusions and the organization of a final report.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) mark the beginning of data analysis in the process of data collection when, through the interview process, the participant sees new meanings and interpretations in his or her story. The interviewer condenses and interprets the meaning and

sends it back to the participant for verification. Through this ongoing iterative process of member checking, data collection and analysis are interrelated.

The data analysis process employed in this study is detailed in the following sections. It is important to keep in mind that there is not always a clear separation between data collection and data analysis, as the process continually doubles back on itself and some of the processes occur concurrently (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Creswell, 2014).

Transcription. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) define a transcript as “a translation from one narrative mode—oral discourse—into another narrative mode—written discourse” (p. 204). They caution: “Attempts at verbatim interview transcriptions produce hybrids, artificial constructs that may be adequate to neither the lived oral conversation nor the formal style of written texts” (p. 204). The trustworthiness of a study may be compromised by irregularities in the transcription process.

For the sake of consistency, I employed one transcriber who followed the same form of transcription for each of the 18 interviews in this multiple-case study. The verbatim approach was used, although stumbles and fillers were eliminated for ease of analysis. My goal was to record an optimally accurate written account of each interview on which to base my search for patterns of meaning through coding.

Coding. “Coding is analysis,” according to Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 56). They describe codes as “efficient data-labeling and data-retrieval devices . . . [that] empower and speed up analysis” (p. 65). Qualitative experts agree that the value of the coding process is in identifying patterns and deriving meaning from the raw data of the interviews. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) place coding as the first step in finding meaning from data: “1) meaning coding, 2) meaning condensation, 3) meaning interpretation” (p. 223). More concretely, Schwandt (2007)

defines coding as “a procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks them down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments” (p. 32).

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) differentiate between concept driven codes (developed in advance) and data driven codes (starting with a blank slate). Whether predefined or postdefined (Miles’ and Huberman’s terms), it is important for the researcher to understand that as the field experience progresses, codes will change. According to Richards (2015), first-pass or broad-brush coding is a helpful way for novices to get started. Subsequently, the “process of revising coding, and *coding on* to newly discovered categories makes coding a process of discovery rather than merely description” (p. 116).

Seidman (2013) discusses the many benefits of using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), including: importing transcripts directly into the database, assigning multiple codes to any one excerpt, and ease of retrieval through filing and/or searches. Bazeley and Jackson (2013) provide guidance specific to NVivo10 for Mac, the CAQDAS of my choice, particularly with regard to the creation of “a hierarchy in which nodes [NVivo terminology for codes] representing subcategories are placed under higher-level or ‘parent’ nodes” (p. 76).

My goal in coding was to capture the richness of the attitudes, purposes, and practices of the participants in order to describe, understand, and answer my research question. Patterns did emerge through the use of NVivo 10 for Mac, which was designed for working with rich, text-based data. My novice status required learning and practice, including a week-long online NVivo course and webinar.

Trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss the concept of trustworthiness in naturalistic terms, describing the traditional concept of reliability as *consistency* and explaining

that reliability is a precondition for validity. Naturalistic inquiry has been criticized for being undisciplined and subjective, therefore it is critical that the qualitative researcher incorporate techniques in both the data collection and data analysis processes that strengthen reliability and validity. In this study I employed the technique of member checking throughout both of these phases.

Member checking, both formal and informal, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) is “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Stake (1995) defines member checking as a process where:

the actor [interviewee] is requested to examine rough drafts of writing where the actions or words of the actor are featured. The actor is asked to review the material for accuracy and palatability. The actor may be encouraged to provide alternate language or interpretation but is not promised that that version will appear in the final report. Regularly, some of that feedback is worthy of inclusion. (p. 115)

The technique of member checking relates back to the previous discussion about transcriptions. As language is transcribed from the oral word to the written text, it may be found that communication did not translate well, and that corrections may make for more accurate research. Member checking was employed on an ongoing basis during this multiple-case study. Formal member checks took place after interviews were transcribed and when drafts were presented to participants. Informal member checks took place, as needed for my clarification, during both the data collection and data analysis phases.

Potential challenges. Numerous potential challenges are present in data analysis procedures including limitations regarding transcriptions, coding, data overload, and member checking. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) remind the researcher, “Oral speech and written text entail different language games . . . [and invoke the phrase] *traduire trahitori*—translators are traitors” (p. 204). The potential for meaning to be lost in translation is real, and the researcher

must take care to provide for accurate, consistent transcriptions. Without accurate records body language, tone of voice, and pace of the interview will be inexpressible.

Miles and Huberman (1994) caution the researcher that coding can be a messy business. They advise the researcher to “make sure all of the codes fit into a structure, that they relate to or are distinct from others in meaningful, study-important ways” (p. 65). The most important coding caveat is to avoid adding, removing, or reconfiguring codes without a reason that relates to meeting the purpose or questions of the study. The novice researcher could potentially reach flawed conclusions through inexpert, careless coding.

Data overload is a common concern in qualitative inquiry. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) warn the researcher about the question, “*How shall I find a method to analyze the 1,000 pages of interview transcripts I have collected?*” (p. 215). The answer is to “think about how the interviews are to be analyzed before they are conducted” (p. 216) and to rephrase the question as, “*How do I go about finding the meaning of the many interesting and complex stories my interviewees told me?*” (p. 217).

Finally, while respected qualitative research experts advocate for the use of member checking, Schwandt (2007) has raised concerns about how member checking establishes “truth of findings” (p. 187). Schwandt presents the potential situation where an interviewee disagrees with the report of a researcher simply because it casts him or her in a negative light. It is also possible that the researcher could record a segment of an interview incorrectly and the interviewee might not catch the error during the member checking process. Similarly, Stake (1995), who advocates for the use of member checking, expresses disappointment that “the most frequent response of the actors to whom I have sent drafts is not to acknowledge that I have sent

anything” (p. 116). This presents particular difficulty when he does not have all of his facts straight and requires the assistance of the participant.

Analysis leads to reporting. While the reporting phase of the study is not part of the data analysis phase, it is important for the researcher to remember that each aspect of the case study process is connected and that analysis results in reporting. The work of planning for reporting actually begins during the data analysis process. A benefit of the multiple-case study approach is the ability to do a cross-case synthesis in order to deepen understanding and provide more robust findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2014). In this manner, the reporting in chapter 4 begins with the cases presented individually, then proceeds to a cross-case synthesis as described through the themes that emerged in the data analysis process.

Ethics and IRB

The relevant ethics that govern research with human subjects have been set forth in *The Belmont Report* by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects in Biomedical and Behavioral Research (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1979). Following is Sieber’s (1992) comprehensive explanation of the three ethical principles that were established in that report:

- A. *Beneficence*—maximizing good outcomes for science, humanity, and the individual research participants while avoiding or minimizing unnecessary risk, harm, or wrong.
- B. *Respect*—protecting the autonomy of (autonomous) persons, with courtesy and respect for individuals as persons, including those who are not autonomous (e.g., infants, the mentally retarded, senile persons).
- C. *Justice*—ensuring reasonable, nonexploitative, and carefully considered procedures and their fair administration; fair distribution of costs and benefits among persons and groups (i.e., those who bear the risks of research should be those who benefit from it). (p. 18)

From these three ethical principals stem six norms of behavior that the researcher of human subjects must follow. Sieber (1992) lists these as: “valid research design, competence of researcher, identification of consequences, selection of subjects, voluntary informed consent, and compensation for injury” (p. 19).

The University of Illinois’ Institutional Review Board (IRB) ensures that these principles and norms are adhered to in human subjects research. All relevant ethical requirements can be found on the IRB website (<http://www.irb.illinois.edu/?q=ethics/belmont.html>). Researchers are required to complete teaching modules that demonstrate understanding of ethical principles, norms, and requirements, and the *Application for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects* must be completed by the researcher and approved by the IRB prior to the onset of the study. No aspect of this study began until all IRB concerns were fully addressed and approved. All of the principles and norms stated in *The Belmont Report* were fully covered in the IRB application process.

For this study of middle level principals for parent-school partnership at the time of transition from elementary to middle level, I worked with adult, non-vulnerable populations. The selection of participants process was clearly communicated in the IRB application. Data collection was not anonymous, but confidentiality of individually identifiable data was ensured. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and they were informed that there was no more than minimal risk involved in the study. Participants were informed of expected benefits to the subjects, researcher, and society. This study was not funded by an outside source and subjects were not remunerated for their participation. These and all other ethical considerations and requirements were maintained throughout the course of this study.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Findings

Case Studies

The purpose of this study is to describe and understand how nominated middle level principals foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle school through a multiple-case study of six middle level principals in Illinois. While cases are described in full detail for the purpose of this study in the first half of this chapter, certain data are aggregated in the themes section in the second half for two purposes. One is that thematic aggregation of data by themes provides an opportunity to distinguish patterns and areas of similarity or difference, thus enriching analysis and reporting. The other is to maintain the confidentiality of participants when particular information might be unique or might lead to identification.

It is important to remember that the principal is the unit of study. While findings related to the narrow focus of the research question are thoroughly described in this chapter, other tangential reporting surrounding attitudes and beliefs of principals, their purposes for parent-school partnerships, and their practices with regard to partnerships with parents, all in general and not specific to parent-school partnerships at the time of transition, is included here when such inclusion enhances an understanding of the unit of study. When discussing the limitations of this study in chapter 5, I further explain the challenge, both in the gathering and the reporting of data, of focusing on and describing a very narrow aspect of the principal's job, even while that aspect is inextricably interwoven with other aspects of his or her complex work.

A wide range of professional experience and school district characteristics will be represented in the data analysis that follows. Every participant in this study is currently a principal in Illinois, each in a different school district and in a different county. Two of these school districts are located in suburban counties of the greater Chicago area; the other four school districts are located in counties that are south of Interstate 80, one of which is further south, closer to Interstate 64. Two of the districts are in counties that border other states.

Three of the school districts have an elementary school structure and three are unit districts that serve kindergarten through high school. The six school districts range in pupil enrollment size of 1,044 to 6,349, with a median enrollment of 2,807. The represented middle schools range in pupil enrollment size of 261 to 1,421, with a median enrollment of 519. The localities in which the schools are situated are designated as either city or village governments. In the cases of some districts that have been consolidated, *locality* may include several towns or parts of more than one county. Rounded median family incomes in the represented districts range from \$38,000 to \$146,000, the median being \$52,000. The percentage of families living below the poverty line in these localities ranges from 2.3% to 14.7%, the median being 6.4%. Locality population sizes range from 4,066 to 30,022 with a rounded median size of 8,600.

The characteristics of the participating principals are as varied as are their district demographics. The highest level of education for these six principals is: Two have attained master's degrees; two are currently doctoral candidates; and two have attained doctoral degrees. Five are male, while only one is female. They range in age from 27 to 54, with a median age of 44.5. These principals are in their second, third, fourth, sixth, eighth, and eleventh years in their current positions. This, however, does not account for previous experience. The least experienced principal has a combined job experience of six years: three as a teacher and three as

a principal. The most experienced principal retired from a 31-year career in another state, including 20 years of administrative experience. Participants have served in positions requiring administrative certification for a median of 10.5 years. Teaching experience prior to becoming an administrator ranges from three to 14 years. Collectively, other positions held by participants prior to their current principalship include: assistant principal, dean of students, guidance counselor, and paraprofessional, as well as principalships in previous districts. In addition to middle school experience, two of the participants have had significant high school experience. Great care has been taken here to maintain the confidentiality of all participants. Localities are described, but counties are not named. Descriptions of localities are limited in such a way that they cannot be singled out and identified.

In this first part of the data analysis, each participant is described individually in a way that conveys a sense of his or her beliefs and attitudes, purposes for parent-school partnerships, and the specific work they are doing with regard to parent-school partnerships at the time of transition from elementary to middle level. Transition periods are discussed in their entirety, including children, parents, and teachers. This broad reporting provides a framework within which to understand the place of and emphasis on parents in the transition process. The principal's attention to parent involvement in the transition process is reported in detail as it arises within the timeline. Specific activities within the defined transition period for each school are listed in chronological order. Principals have provided documentation for many of the activities, as a method for member checking. Each principal is identified by a letter from *A* through *F*, in no particular order, and their schools and districts are identified likewise.

Principal A.

The principal, self-described: Attitudes and leadership style. It is just a matter of fact that he is "a pretty pointed, sharp person." He is direct in his approach, often black and white in

his thinking. Principal A takes care to be specific with his language; he does not mince words. He explains that he will not be the one to sit around and hold hands and talk to people about how they feel. But the other side of that coin is equally clear. Regarding parents and students, he emphasizes, “My job is to serve them, and I’m going to serve them.”

Principal A’s strong moral compass drives every action he takes, professionally and otherwise. He describes himself as “a force,” and says, “I don’t do it to be mean. I know it turns some people off. I recognize that.” This force of a principal is one who is very much action-oriented based on his core values. He says, “There are times when my values don’t line up to your values. And you’re not going to like me when my values and your values aren’t aligned. But I’m going to stay right where I’m at.” He tells his teachers and parents, “You’re going to see that I’m going to keep moving forward. And I’m going to snatch you up and pull you with me.”

Principal A traces his path to School A in this way: He believes that when he interviews with a superintendent, it is being determined if his vision, as a candidate, is in alignment with that of the district. Once hired, it is clear to him that he was brought in to enact that vision that he shares with the Board of Education and the superintendent who hired him. His vision is based on his core values and beliefs. He was hired for his vision, to communicate that vision and to enact it, therefore the focus of his job is to “buy-in my teachers, buy-in my students, and buy-in my parents into that vision so we’re all jiving together to make those things happen.” He is a communicator with a vision. Principal A leads from the front. He makes decisions and sticks with them.

Lest one would imagine Principal A as inflexible, rigid, and uncaring, he is quick to elaborate. He “listens, listens, listens . . . then does what he thinks is right.” He cares deeply about people and believes that it is important for his students, parents, and teachers to feel

supported. While he does not bend on his core values and he moves relentlessly toward his vision, he will be flexible, as needed, to ensure that needs are met and to develop buy-in throughout the organization. He is willing to change his vision when teachers or parents make compelling arguments, because he does listen. Also, by nature, visions constantly evolve to meet changing circumstances. In addition, he is committed to his own professional growth and readily acknowledges his mistakes and models how to make course changes.

Leading School A is more than a job for Principal A. It is his mission. As an action-oriented leader, he wants results. It is not unusual for him to make home visits, whether to discuss a child's progress with a parent or to pull a tired adolescent out of bed in the morning. He says, "There are times when I won't worry about liability. I don't worry about putting a kid in my car. It's about what the people need at the time." In one case, a child was not attending school because he did not have appropriate clothing to wear. Principal A took the child and his father to Walmart, bought him school clothes, then decided that the dad needed some clothing, as well. On the way home he treated them to dinner. After church each Sunday morning, Principal A puts in 10 hours at the school. This is the day he often makes home visits. He is also the guy who is buying food for a school event and is at the grill cooking.

In Principal A's words,

I just can't separate. Some people can. And I think that if you can separate, you'll soon very much see this as a job. People can turn it off. When someone asks why I do this, I say, well this is how many hours I have in a day and this is how I prioritized. I very much feel like I will pour out as much as I can possibly pour out until I physically cannot pour out anymore.

Further questioning elicits Principal A's assertion that he does the things he does because "people are on my to-do list, so they are scheduled in." When questioned about why people are on the to-do list of a principal who is, by his own description, "not touchy feely," he responds, "I know that's what makes an effective school. Relationships make a school effective. You put

people on your to-do list because it makes your building effective.” So relationships are on Principal A’s to-do list. And he *does* them with great purpose.

School and district overview. School A is located in central Illinois (defined as south of Interstate 80 and north of Interstate 64) in a farming and manufacturing community with a population of over 8,000. This community borders another state. The 2014 Illinois School Report Card identifies School A as predominately White, with 3% of the students categorized as multiracial and less than 1% in other racial/ethnic groups. With 55% overall proficiency on the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) and 63% of students reported as low-Income, Principal A is justifiably proud of the 95.8% attendance rate, compared to 94.5% for the state) and 100% parental contact (compared to 95.7% for the state). The district is organized by grade level centers, therefore only one elementary school feeds into this middle school, which serves all students from sixth through eighth grades district-wide. Principal A lives within the boundaries of the school district (see Appendix K).

Expressed purposes of parent-school partnerships, both in general and during transition. Parent-school partnerships are very much a means to an end for Principal A. It is one of the foundational things necessary to get to the work of student growth. His belief is that one cannot focus on curriculum development until a positive culture is established. Relationship building is a proactive act for Principal A. He wants to be one step ahead of the parents. He believes that having a relationship established before a crisis occurs will help him every time. He describes his proactive communication with parents as “not top down or bottom up, but two-way.” This two-way communication places him in the leadership role as an advocate for children.

Principal A's overarching goal for parent-school partnerships is having them as supportive members of his team. His role is to serve his parents, not to fight them. He works hard to build positive relationships. He wants parents to be involved at middle level, but expects that participation to be quantitatively less than and different from that at the elementary school. He says, "I'm human resources. I'm managing people. Not everyone wants to live his life the way I want to live mine. And so I understand that. And so I have to be willing to be flexible with people to make sure that I'm meeting everyone's needs."

At the time of transition from elementary to middle school, Principal A believes that it is very important for parents to be actively engaged in their child's learning. His goals for the transition period with regard to parents include parents being able to: identify where their children are socially and academically, appropriately supporting their child's needs, and appropriately communicating with teachers about their children. His role during the transition period is to help parents understand what is developmentally appropriate during middle school and how to help their children grow in independence. He thinks that the most important thing a parent can do during the transition period is talk with their child and care for their child.

Principal A is concerned that parental attitudes during the transition period often "do not make for a positive effect on children." He clearly states that he does not think that parents are negative, but rather that "their attitude is not going to force a positive transition. I will force a neutral, if not negative experience." He feels that parents are not excited about their child making a transition. He says, "Transitions are inherently either neutral or scary." The only parent who is excited is the parent of an athlete who is looking forward to new opportunities for their child to be on a sports team.

His transition practice emphasizes communication and modeling values and behavior for parents and staff. He expects them to live up to what he is modeling. He says,

You have to be able to read people. You have to be able to understand where people's limits are. People are a priority, but at the end of the day, my goal is to get people to do things. I'm task oriented and I want to see results.

With regard to how he builds relationships, Principal A explains, "I think right off the bat, you have to start talking to parents and showing them that you care. You just listen. You care. You follow up." This is the message he wants parents to walk away from the transition period with.

Transition practices: Timeline and activities. The transition process at School A begins for fifth grade students in January at the beginning of second semester. Formal transition activities end right after the start of the school year in sixth grade, although team building and re-teaching activities for students and parents continue through the fall and taper all the way through the third quarter of the year. The transition timeframe is the same for parents as it is for students; it just looks different. Most activities are for students, and those are accompanied by communication directed at the parents.

January. Principal A meets with all fifth grade students and presents a welcome to middle school video.

February. Combination locks are a source of significant worry for fifth grade students. As each case is reported, it will be clear that this worry is universal across all of these case studies. Principal A's approach to the fear of combination locks is to make learning fun. Students learn to work a combination lock and are given time to practice. They then compete for the fastest time. There is a prize for the speediest fifth grade student. His or her combination lock skill is rewarded with lunch with the principal—and friends are also invited. Parents receive their

first welcome communication from the middle school at this time. Coming transition events are detailed and they are invited to join in.

March. Fifth grade students visit the middle school in mid-March from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m., when they participate in a scavenger hunt that is actually a cleverly designed tour of the school. This provides an opportunity for students to acclimate to their new building. Following the evening's activities, students enjoy a pizza dinner with the principal. This activity is strictly for students; no parents allowed.

April. Parents of fifth grade students are invited into the middle school building for the first time during the transition process. They tour the building, then they engage in a question and answer session with the principal. Students may accompany their parents for this activity. Teachers are also present. Principal A's rationale for doing fun activities with students from January through March, is that by April students will have communicated much excitement about entering middle school to their parents. His hope is that when, in mid- to late-April, parents first participate in person, they will have heard so much positive feedback from their children that they will be more likely to enter the building without anxiety.

May. The fifth/sixth grade dance is a major social activity for students who are transitioning to middle school. Teachers attend this event, but not parents.

June. Principal A leads incoming sixth graders in 30 days (including weekends) of fitness activities that he calls *Fit Camp for the Couch Potato* with good humor, as he is "admittedly not the most fit person." Students attend on a volunteer basis and engage in a wide variety of activities including: badminton, tennis, fitness videos, even running stairs. Students enjoy having input about the activities and are excited when students from other grades sometimes join in.

August. School begins, but for the first two days sixth grade students participate in *Boot Camp*. Each of the 2 days is divided into five or six periods during which teachers lead students through hands-on preparation for middle school. Goals for *Boot Camp* include learning about community service, academic expectations, the school handbooks, safety drills, team building, assembly procedures, locker supply preparation, procedures for lunch and locker rooms, behavioral expectations, and a full run through of individual student schedules in an abbreviated 60 minutes.

Principal A gives all teachers school t-shirts that they wear for both days of *Boot Camp*. They look like a team. Following each day's activities, teachers go out to eat in the community displaying a school identity. Principal A feels that the first days of school are often repetitive, with each teacher sharing the same rules and procedures. He initiated *Boot Camp* in order to share all of the procedural information and expectations in a fun way using stations. Students rotate through stations that are alternatively fun and caring (e.g., team building) and serious and maybe a bit scary (e.g., fire drill procedures).

Continuing transition activities. As students are oriented to the school, Principal A facilitates individual meetings for parents and staff regarding specific needs of their children. These meetings might be for parents of students in the advanced program or parents of students who require physical accommodations. Not all parents will require a personal meeting.

After school has started, students and parents merge into a community that is full of fun activities that may be organized for students only, parents only, or whole families. Principal A's goal for activity nights is to "just get parents in the building," whether it is for a movie night, murder mystery night, or parent education sessions. His belief is that the middle school building should be the hub of community activity.

Even when formal transition activities for students and parents have ended, Principal A views the fifth to sixth grade transition period as continuing for both students and parents in the form of re-teaching and training for specific events throughout the calendar year.

Future transitions: Plans and dreams. Teachers have increasingly initiated suggestions for future transitions, wanting to be more involved in the process. Principal A is also interested in creating opportunities for grandparent involvement. He sees them as an asset, more supportive and less anxious than the parents. His teachers think that having grandparents man the stations at *Boot Camp* will be an ideal way to bring them in. He is pleased that, only 4 months into the current school year, collaboratively processed improvements in the transition period for the coming year are already shaping up to be even more warm and welcoming for students and their parents. This year's transition period is fresh in his mind and, being action oriented, Principal A believes that is the time to begin planning ahead. He feels that teachers are ready to assume some roles in the process, and he plans to involve staff to a greater extent than before in the relationship building that takes place during the transition process.

A personal goal of Principal A's is to make a home visit to every new student's home before they enter the building at the start of the school year. This ambitious goal is one that he revisits each year; one that may some day become a reality. And if money were no obstacle, he would bring something like a home-cooked pie or a dozen fresh baked cookies with him. He explains, "I'm so direct that sometimes I'm afraid I come off too aggressive. That's why I want to bring the pie—to soften it up."

Principal B.

The principal, self-described: Attitudes and leadership style. First and foremost, Principal B takes the stance that she is the building leader, not the manager. Her leadership style

is collaborative and she would not describe herself as a micromanager in any way. When she was a new principal, she took time to learn the lay of the land, delaying wholesale changes while she developed staff readiness. It took two years for her to feel that she had won stakeholders over to the extent that she could advance the improvement process, or as she says, “Move this train forward! Hop on or get out of the way!”

Her tone helps to describe her leadership. Principal B “gets” middle school at her core and says, “There’s probably not a person in this town that doesn’t know that.” She is excited to work with students every day and sees her relationships with parents as positive. Her leadership style is “up” and flexible. She believes in having a minimal number of rules so as not to stifle children. When students think a rule needs to be changed, Principal B entertains their ideas, as long as they agree to express how the idea will affect everyone, not just their group. Her enthusiastic tone does not preclude her desire to be firm, fair, and flexible. Her individual approach with each parent is consistently open and caring. But when people are difficult, Principal B says, “Give me a challenge and I’ll take care of it.” She is skilled in dealing with difficult people, always taking into account what is going on with them at home and in their lives.

School B is a beautiful building and Principal B enjoys opening it to the community. Parents are invited to many activities, especially in the evenings, like: sporting events, parent science night, art jazz night, technology nights, and band and chorus concerts. The building is also a community resource, as it hosts speakers who present on topics like cyber-bullying or technology training. She is particularly proud of offerings for grandparents or senior citizens in the community like *Breakfast and Bingo*, building tours, and *Grandparents/Senior Citizen Day*.

Principal B is “passionate about what we do here” explaining, “At times I go to great lengths to defend the work we do here, but I try not to go overboard. I defend, but am not defensive.”

Her core beliefs in her personal life carry over to her role as principal. She proclaims to teachers, “We’re going to do what’s best for kids. And if that’s not what you’re in it for, then you need to find another thing to do.” She has now been at the school long enough to have had a significant effect on hiring. She brings in teachers who are talented and positive. She calls them “superstars in the classroom,” telling them that their job is to make her look like “a hiring genius.” She then demonstrates her trust in them by allowing a great deal of autonomy in the classroom. Principal B looks for the good in all situations. This life approach and core belief transfers to her students, parents, and students through her oft-repeated affirmation: “Treat them like they’re good.”

Speaking of her internal values, Principal B calls the external resources that she has limited control over (e.g., families who live in the district) the “outside stuff.” She understands that she can only do her best with what she does not control. But she insists that her “inside stuff” has to be solid. She explains, “I don’t know how you could do this job if you didn’t know what you held as right and true.” She says, “Your inside has to be your outside. You cannot be phony in this position and actually have good relationships.”

Principal B describes her generosity toward her parents with humility. She gives her cell phone number out and expects parents to use it when they have a crisis situation. She describes an hour-long phone call she received from a parent starting at 10:00 p.m. one night. It was an important phone call, one that allowed Principal B to deal effectively with the situation first thing in the morning. The parent was apologetic about bothering her at home so late. Principal B expressed her happiness that the parent made the call, “She felt comfortable enough to call me.

And I want that.” Principal B so sincerely wants parents to participate at the school that she will get involved on a personal level to determine if she can help fix what is keeping them away. This has included providing ride money for a parent who has no way to get to the school. Principal B finds herself up nights thinking about how to find more time to get to know the parents and how to give them more opportunities to be involved at the school. The demographics in the community are such that there are “have-nots,” and she wants to be sure that they are not left out.

School and district overview. School B is located in central Illinois in a city with a population of over 5,000 described by the principal as a “bedroom community comprised largely of learned professionals with high expectations.” Families move to this locality because of the excellent reputation of the school district. The 2014 Illinois School Report Card identifies School B as predominantly White, with less than 2% in five other racial/ethnic categories. Overall proficiency on the ISAT is at 69% and 21% of students are reported as low-income. The attendance rate for School B is 95.8% and parental contact is reported at 100%. The district is organized by grade level centers, therefore only one elementary school feeds into this middle school, which serves all students from sixth through eighth grades district-wide. Principal B lives within the boundaries of the district (see Appendix K).

Expressed purposes of parent-school partnerships, both in general and during transition. Like Principal A, Principal B expresses the need to be proactive, to anticipate concerns before they come up. Her *means to an end* aspect of parent-school partnerships is that having a connection, an open door policy, a consistency is listening to what parents are saying and really hearing them will pave the way to common ground and understanding. She says, “It is important to actually walk the walk, because their perception is their reality, whether it’s reality or not.” Changing negative perceptions would be next to impossible without positive connections

with parents. According to Principal B, “If you don’t have the support of parents, you’re not going to be successful.” In order to have a positive, nurturing, academically excellent school, you need the parents. You want them to be on the same team. Principal B models parent relationships for her teachers. She models solution seeking. She wants teachers and parents to establish positive relationships before issues come up.

While Principal B understands the value of parent-school partnerships, School B does not have a formal parent teacher organization. Volunteerism is a grass roots effort, often focused around sports. In the service of hearing more parents’ voices, and different ones from the small group of regulars, Principal B plans to get a principal’s council off the ground this year. This parent advisory group will take the form of *Pizza with the Principal*, or something like that in order to make it accessible, especially to those who may fall between the cracks and need most of all to be heard. She would like this organization to feel informal and not hierarchical or elitist.

Principal B approaches relationships person by person. She calls it “the art of relationships, not the science of relationships” and she believes there is no set formula for working with people. It is important for her to be able to look parents straight in the eye and explain why what she is doing is best for their kids.

Principal B works to have the school setting mirror the family setting. She says, “If we take a look at what makes a family cohesive, we will understand that strife and strain result in basic needs not being met.” She is not interested in creating artificial relationships where people pretend to be happy with the school, then take their frustrations out on social media. Her strong belief is that when the parent-school partnerships are secure, the parents understand that their children are cared for. Principal B acknowledges that involvement means something different to each parent, but in support of her goal to lead a school that is positive, nurturing, and

academically excellent, she strongly believes “we *all* have to work toward that.” Proof that relationships are positive is that children leave the school with smiles on their faces, and when they get home, those smiles cause more smiles on the faces of parents and grandparents.

It is important for parents to understand that everyone makes mistakes, and Principal B is more than happy to model the mistake and recovery process for them. Parents do tend to express concerns, even anger at times. This is where the rapport between Principal B and her assistant principal comes into play. She explains, “We want them to know that we will call them or they can come in and discuss concerns.” If parents are angry, she will help calm them down and put the concern in perspective. Principal B believes there is always room for growth regarding connections with parents.

Principal B describes fifth grade students as being almost swaddled:

You’re in a cocoon and you’re traveling around as a pod, a group of people. Then all of a sudden, that cocoon’s broken open into sixth grade. And now you have to change classes and get to class on time, and, oh my gosh, you have to use a combination lock. It’s just too much!

These student concerns set off a panic in parents and it is the school’s job to help parents understand that they are fretting over something that has not even happened yet. Their fear is of the unknown.

Principal B’s main goal for parent-school partnerships at the time of transition is calming fear and establishing trust. By the time sixth grade starts, she wants parents to feel that when they drop their child off at the middle school, he or she will be safe, cared for, and secure. The transition process allows the school to demonstrate that this caring attitude is shared by all who work in the school. The school needs to communicate the necessary academic, procedural, and emotional information to parents at this time so they will understand expectations and how things

will be communicated. By the end of the process, Principal B wants parents to know that their fears were unfounded.

Despite the “giant room of fear and anxiousness” that occurs when parents first begin transitioning to middle level, Principal B does not believe that there is a negative aspect of parent involvement at middle level. If the transition is done well, parents will understand that “our philosophy on a daily basis is to do what’s best for kids. As long as they get that, parent involvement is awesome.”

Transition practices: Timeline and activities. The transition period at School B begins in late January or early February and, although formal transition activities end after the school year begins, Principal B views the transition for students as being over by mid-term of the first quarter. Then, she says, “The process that is just middle school takes over, because all of middle school is nothing but a transition.”

Principal B sees the parent transition period as a bit shorter, as she feels that parents are fully transitioned about three weeks into the school year. Once they see that their child is adjusting to middle school and is having fun, parents relax. In Principal B’s opinion, the parent transition ends when the main goal of reducing, if not eliminating, anxiety has been reached. She does acknowledge that transitions occur on a continuum. Parents have differing levels of concern and anxiety, so some take longer than others. She explains that parents tend to transition more readily over procedures than over issues regarding the growing independence of their children. The assistant principal at School B often serves as the point person with regard to transition activities.

January-February. Principal B and her assistant principal work enthusiastically at creating relationships with the fifth grade students in the district, beginning with their visit to

each fifth grade class to discuss the transition to middle school with the students. Principal B has been in the district so long that she already knows the names of many fifth graders because of her already existing relationship with the family. It is not unusual for her to be seen high-fiving students as she walks through the elementary school hallways. Principal B believes that relationships should be visible even before students and parents who are transitioning walk through the middle school doors.

May. Fifth grade students visit the middle school for the sole purpose of having a positive experience. The tour the building under the leadership of Student Council members and they meet the teachers. Some rules are discussed, but the focus of the day, according to Principal B is, “You’re going to love it here.” The important topic of combination locks is covered and students are encouraged to get their locks and practice over the summer. This truly is a source of anxiety for students.

May-August. Parents meet and communicate individually with the principal and assistant principal, as needed. Principal B reports parent interactions throughout the summer as being “99% positive.”

August. The *Moving Up to Middle School* program is the keystone activity of the transition process. In mid-August, students and their parents attend this middle-of-the-day orientation where they learn about the structure of the middle school, *Encore* (exploratory) courses and extracurricular activity offerings, academic expectations, organization and executive functioning guidance, social-emotional aspects of early adolescence, and behavioral expectations. Bullying is discussed at length. Schedules are distributed at this time and students and parents are encouraged to “walk their schedule.” And of course, students are given time to find their lockers and practice opening their combination locks. In keeping with their early

adolescent development, there are students who insist on attending this event alone, without their parents.

Also in August, there are two workshop days scheduled for teachers. For the first time this year on the afternoon of the second day, Principal B opened the school to incoming sixth graders and their parents for the purpose of settling in with schedules, lockers, and building orientation. This was an open, self-directed time for students and parents to take care of their needs in an individual manner. Principal B also allows parents and students to come into the building any time in August when the floors are not being waxed. It is of critical importance to her that parents and students are given all the time they need to ready for the start of school and to be comfortable on the very first day.

Principal B views the whole of sixth grade as being a kinder, gentler time for students. The gradual release of responsibility moves students along the path to greater independence at the seventh grade level. She says that after the formal transition period, “the rest of the year is just a different kind of caring for sixth graders.”

Future transitions: Plans and dreams. The afternoon half day in August during which the building was open for incoming sixth graders and their parents for the purpose of settling in to their new building (locker set-up, walking the schedule, etc.) was not well received by many teachers, who felt that it took away from time they needed to get classrooms ready for opening day. This parent-student activity was new this year, and Principal B’s most immediate goal for the future is “to grow this day into more or better time for parents and students.” She reports that in response to teachers not being receptive to having families in the building on their second workshop day at the start of the school year, she had to pull out the contract to confirm that teachers are only guaranteed one half day of self-directed time in their classrooms. She will

continue to work within the constraints of the teacher contract to provide more opportunities for parents and children, all while educating teachers as to the importance of this and, hopefully, creating staff buy-in.

Principal B firmly believes that “changes going forward will be dynamic or we won’t reach the people we need to reach.” She estimates that her transition process is about 85% of the way to where it needs to be with regard to parents. She plans to continue her practice of assessing the climate of each incoming group and adapting each year’s transition program to meet that specific group’s needs. She will continue to be proactive in looking for ways to uncover parents’ questions and concerns and respond to them. In her dream world, she would be able to offer students a week-long “camp-type” experience for students and teachers. This would take place for a couple of hours a day and would allow for team-building experiences, as well as orientation to rules and routines.

Principal C.

The principal, self-described: Attitudes and leadership style. Principal C sees himself as having the skill to put the right people in place to make things happen. He surrounds himself with talented people and allows them to do their best work within the processes and practices that are in place within the school and district. Although he can be “very direct” in his conversations with parents and staff, especially if he is delivering a difficult message, he does not consider himself to be a directive or top-down leader.

His strong belief is that the best leaders are the ones who are able to move on to other jobs or retirement and the organization that they have built is so stable that the transition to new leadership is smooth. The system does not break down. Principal C believes that overly directive principals create schools that do not have a strong foundation. It is not healthy for an

organization to be too dependent on one person. At School C “everyone has a piece of the puzzle,” so he views the structure as collaborative and supportive by nature. He is not interested in gaining respect from stakeholders by virtue of his position. He wants to be followed because of this practice.

Principal C’s solid value system guides his personal as well as his professional life. He believes in demonstrating sincerity and honesty in his actions. In his dealings with others, he is prompt and courteous. “Don’t fear conflict” is a value he tries to live by. He stands up for his beliefs, even when that is challenging. According to Principal C, “The path of least resistance is not always the correct one.” He believes the most important aspect of communication is listening. He aims to gain the trust of all stakeholders in his school, but does not want that to be blind trust. He wants to earn trust by being true to his values.

He works at modeling consistency because he believes his parents, students, and teachers appreciate and expect that from him. He uses the same language and the same clarity with all stakeholders. Principal C believes that “if your practice is consistent and people respect your practice, decision-making process, and thoughtfulness, your word will carry weight.” He takes that belief to heart and feels that he has a direct impact on the people he serves through the way in which he approaches his practice.

There is an aspect of school leadership that Principal C described as troubling. He explains,

Kids are kids; parents are parents. But the barriers and obstacles that you face from one community to another can be very different. So what works for other districts might not work for us. I really think you need to focus on what you do well as a unit. You need to be great at what you do and be self-critical of your practice in order to know which practices will transfer well to your district and which will not. I think you have to look at each district as a giant puzzle, and every puzzle has different pieces. There are some things that are common to most puzzles, and those you can just plug right in. Other things are unique and you need to look at them on a personal, individual basis.

Principal C's frustration is with a *one-size fits all* approach. While other cases in this study discussed challenges specific to their schools and communities, this concern was not of paramount importance to them. This concern seemed more related to curriculum than to parent-school partnerships or transitions. It is included in this reporting of his attitudes and leadership style as an indication of his reflective process, his advocacy for his school and community, and his concern, in general, for how things are being done in education. With regard to this study, Principal C's sensitivity to this issue may serve as a reminder that, as all communities face unique barriers, so do parent-school partnerships. This is a reminder that community matters.

A final thought from Principal C with regard to his attitudes about leadership is about the importance of recognizing barriers early and acting on them because you can see them. According to Principal C, "When you see a need for change, you have the choice of maintaining the status quo and treading water, or you can choose to be a critical thinker and seek solutions without fear of failure." He believes that sometimes it is necessary to step out of your comfort zone to achieve professional and institutional growth.

School and district overview. School C is located in central Illinois in a sprawling farming and manufacturing rural community with a population of over 4,000. The 2014 Illinois School Report Card identifies School C as predominantly White. Almost 4% of students are reported as multiracial, with another 2% belonging to three other racial/ethnic categories. Overall proficiency on the ISAT is reported as 75% and 39% of students are reported as low-income. The attendance rate for School C is 96.4% and parental contact is reported at 100%. One elementary school feeds into this middle school, which serves all students from sixth through eighth grades district-wide. Principal C lives within the boundaries of the school district (see Appendix K).

Expressed purposes of parent-school partnerships, both in general and during transition. To prevent parent contacts from becoming negative, Principal C believes it is essential to take a proactive approach and model what the expectation is for parent-school partnerships. He is in agreement with the other participants in this study that it is important to establish positive contacts with families early in the relationship. That proactive effort will immediately lessen the abrasiveness of subsequent conversations that may have the potential to be a difficult.

The Parent Teacher Association (PTA) is a district-wide organization in District C. While parents are welcome at the middle school, Principal C explains that they are not asked to be volunteers at middle level. Parents are not trained to the level of the sixth through eighth grade curricula, therefore they would not be of use helping in classrooms the way that they are used to doing in the elementary grades. Principal C has a holistic, district-wide view about the use of the PTA. He believes they actually support him best by putting the bulk of their effort in at the foundation level, the elementary school. That way, they are supporting his future students. He also works with them to support their work at the high school (e.g., tailgate for *Homecoming*).

According to Principal C, the two main tasks of the principal in promoting parent-school partnerships are ensuring encouragement and transparency. Parents are a vital part of the education process, so their participation in the process must be encouraged. The principal's transparency in all communication will engender trust.

His philosophy about parent-school partnerships, in general, is that they occur on a continuum. He speculates that, perhaps, when students have greater need, parents typically have greater commitment to partnership. There are other parents who are rarely seen in the school, and

this may be because their children do not have significant needs and the parents do not feel the urgency to engage with the school.

Principal C views a child's middle school years as the ideal time for the school to engage parents by providing education about the academic and social-emotional development of their children. For example, he believes that as children gain greater independence, it is developmentally appropriate for them to learn that failure is an acceptable practice, as long as it leads to correction and growth. That may be a difficult conversation for parents to have because their natural inclination can be to protect their child. He believes it is the school's responsibility to partner with parents in order to help them understand how to support their children.

Middle school is the jumping off point where students begin to gain independence from their parents. This can be a frightening realization for parents, so Principal C takes very seriously his responsibility for gaining parental trust during the transition process. He cites the now familiar anxieties that students and parents experience: Students will change classes and have lockers . . . with locks! Principal C points out that students actually changed some classes in fifth grade, and they each had their cubby. In fact, there *will be* big changes at middle level, including lots of new procedures and the growing independence of the child. Principal C thinks the best part of middle school is that "children are developing so wildly differently." He does understand that parents often find that frightening rather than exciting, and he can empathize with parents about how different middle school feels and how intimidating it can be for parents.

Principal C's main goals for parents during the transition period are to help them feel secure in the fact that their children are coming to a safe place where they can succeed and to provide a forum through which parents' fears can be addressed and ameliorated. According to Principal C, "first impressions are incredibly powerful," and he wants parents to feel safe and

confident about the school. Building partnerships with parents during the transition period will hopefully result in parents trusting that the school will make sound educational decisions for their children. If, for any reason, parents fear sending their child to the middle school, he wants to know so that he may address it.

During the transition period, Principal C and all staff are especially open to communication, criticism, and conversation. They know that it is important to set parents' minds at ease. They want every student and parent to feel comfortable on the first day of school.

Principal C does acknowledge that due to the excellent reputation the middle school has in the community, the transition from fifth to sixth grade may be somewhat less stressful than what students and parents experience at other middle schools. He does not feel like he is swimming upstream, thanks to the history of place. He also points out that it is his job to remember that, although those who work in the school have seen many classes transition into middle school, the parents and students who are going through it this year are doing it only that one time. When the transition from elementary to middle level is over, Principal C's work is not done, as he views relationship building as an ongoing process that continues through to eighth grade promotion.

Transition practices: Timeline and activities. The transition process at School C begins during the fall of fifth grade. This start time is the early outlier among these cases studies, and it occurs due to a need that is specific to this locality: There is no park district, therefore most sports opportunities for youth come through the school district. Formal transition activities end in mid-September with *Parent Night*. Although the transition period starts on a sports theme, academics and organization are the themes that are woven throughout the year leading up to sixth grade. Principal C attends every fifth grade annual review during the transition year. He

also takes great care in his communication with parents. His August welcome to school letter is particularly warm, inviting, and supportive of parents.

September. Principal C meets with all fifth grade students regarding sports opportunities for them at the middle school while they are still in fifth grade. District C aims to serve the maximum number of students with regard to athletics by offering both cut and no-cut sports. At this meeting, Principal C invites fifth grade students to join the sixth and seventh grade students who participate in the intermural program. This is a non-competitive program in which students learn fundamentals and skill building with a coach. The first opportunity of the year is girls' basketball, then the program continues to mirror the competitive sports seasons throughout the year. For the most part, fifth and sixth graders participate in the intermural program. Principal C explains that parents were thrilled when the program opened up to fifth grade students two years ago. In his opinion, "The biggest reason for the intermural program, at least as far as fifth graders are concerned, is to provide fifth graders and their parents a connection with the middle school."

April. Parents have their first opportunity to become involved at the middle school when they are all invited to an organizational meeting during which *Fifth Grade Late Night* is planned. Principal C identifies this as a time for parents to connect with one another. He believes that peer interaction is powerful, no matter what one's age, and he bemoans the fact that not all parents choose to participate in this planning session for their children.

May. In mid-May the transition process is kicked up a notch for students when they attend *Fifth Grade Late Night*, the activity that their parents planned in April. Late Night is a "lock-in" for all students who are transitioning to sixth grade. It is led by teachers, a community liaison, the guidance counselor, and some coaches. Following a brief orientation and tour of the building, students eat together, then spend the rest of the night getting to know one another

through, as the flyer says, “games and activities that have been designed especially for you and your classmates. It will be a great night hanging out at the Middle School!” This event runs from 7:00 to 11:00 p.m. Parents may choose to attend.

Also in May, fifth grade students visit the middle school during the school day to meet with Principal C. He welcomes them to middle school, then reviews building expectations and philosophies. This is meant as a brief introduction, as this information is repeated later in the transition process. Around the same time, the social worker identifies some fifth grade students who would benefit from a personal visit to the middle school. They meet the principal and guidance counselor before taking an individual tour of the building. The purpose of this visit is to reduce anxiety and help these identified students feel safe. Principal C wants to “reduce the intimidation factor when they walk through the door at the start of the school year.”

August. At the very beginning of August, registration takes place in person at the middle school building. According to Principal C, this is an important part of the transition process for parents. Teachers volunteer their time at this event. Students in all grades need to be registered, but extra attention is paid to the parents of incoming sixth graders. Principal C looks each of them in the eye as if to say, “I’m going to be here for your child and this group of teachers are volunteering to be here today because they want to make sure your child has a good transition.” His goal is to get 100% of the parents through the door. He wants to meet each one of them and make sure that all of their registration information is correct. Many districts have moved to electronic registration, but Principal C believes face-to-face interactions are critical, especially as a new school year is about to begin. Once students are registered, they are welcome to enter the building at any time (accompanied by a parent) in order to tour the building, walk their schedule, figure out their transitions during the day, and organize their lockers. There is a two-week

window between registration and the start of school during which students and their families are encouraged to spend as much time in the building as they need. In keeping with a theme that will be discussed later in this chapter, Principal C notes a downward trend in participation at middle level. He estimates that fewer than 10% of families take advantage of this opportunity.

August-September. Boot Camp is an in-school program for selected sixth grade students for the purpose of providing them with individualized support as they adjust to middle school. Students are chosen based on their individual needs. The program runs for one-half hour a day for two to three weeks after school starts. Not all students receive the same skill-building and reinforcement. It is not unusual for students to need help with transitions between classes, understanding their schedules, organizing their materials, and of course, practice with their combination locks. This is a program designed to move students toward greater independence.

September. Parent Night in mid-September marks the official end of the transition period for parents. This event is intended for parents of all grade levels, but the grade levels are separated for the purpose of addressing the unique needs of each. Sixth grade parents meet with administrators and teachers to hear presentations about topics particular to sixth grade. This is a night of broad strokes, an information night not intended for two-way communication. Parents are encouraged to follow up as needed regarding individual concerns. Principal C aims for a high parent attendance rate at this event, so to make things easier for families he has Student Council volunteers on hand to babysit for younger children in the family.

Following the transition period, sixth grade families are encouraged to join in the mainstream community-building activities for parents and children. School C hosts parent breakfasts or lunches at each grade level where parents come in for a meal, sit with their children in the cafeteria, then go to the classrooms to mingle with teachers. This event and the annual

parent teacher conferences are highly attended by parents. The *Hot Topic Nights* presented throughout the year are not well attended by parents and their children.

Future transitions: Plans and dreams. Principal C feels that there is a missing piece in May that needs to be added to his transition process. He plans to institute a fifth grade parent meeting to mirror the meeting that he has with students. He envisions this as a round table discussion during which parents will share their questions and concerns. Ideally, this round table will include a panel of current sixth grade parents to answer questions and provide reassurance. He thinks the *Parent Night* is a wonderful activity, but that this new May meeting would fill in a few key aspects of transition for parents that *Parent Night* does not address, like two-way communication. He would also like to engage staff volunteers during the post-registration open building times in August to accompany students and their parents on their schedule walks in order to provide greater guidance.

Another activity that he plans to add is a sixth grade orientation the day before seventh and eighth graders are in the building at the start of the school year. Principal C thinks the May visit to the middle school by fifth graders is fantastic, but that because it occurs months before they actually start, they can easily forget what they have learned and become overwhelmed. “If we could have them for a few hours before school starts to ease some fears and anxieties, maybe they’ll transition better,” hopes Principal C. He envisions a simulated, abbreviated school day during which teachers would help students adjust to bells and lockers, transition from class to class, and practice lunchroom procedures. This idea was stimulated both by Principal C’s reflection as a participant in this study and by the concurrent expression by his sixth grade teachers that students struggle during the first week or two, and that a voluntary August orientation would help. The details have not yet been determined, but it is possible that parents

will be included in some way. It is Principal C's goal that this orientation will help students go home smiling on the first day of school, thereby creating a sense of comfort in their parents.

If limitless resources were available, Principal C would expand this new orientation into a three-day retreat, partly on-site, partly off. Students would be led through activities (the type that are often done in advisory programs) to address not only academic concerns, but social-emotional ones, as well. School routines would still be included. This could be an opportunity to involve high school students as role models and group leaders.

Principal D.

The principal, self-described: Attitudes and leadership style. Humility is a characteristic that describes Principal D. Despite his 20 years of experience as a principal, he is best at giving others credit, "I certainly don't have any original ideas; I haven't created anything. I've learned from some really good mentors and watched really successful people. That's what's helped me grow." His focus is, and always has been, just trying to figure out what works to move the organization forward. He says, "I don't think experience is everything, but I think that each experience has taught me a lot."

He explains that people come into the middle school with fears, but you cannot fail if you approach them with the perspective, "I'm doing what's best for kids." That is his default position. He does what is best for children, not what is best for adults. That belief guides his decisions.

Principal D is experienced enough to know that it is impossible to know outcomes with certainty in advance, so he tells parents, "I am not able to guarantee anything's going to work, but we're going to be action oriented. We're going to do something and do it the best we can. And we're going to tell you about it." He is overly transparent when communicating with parents

because it does not take much for “people to go up the ladder of inference, then talk about it.” He explains that it is hard to manage perspectives, so he works at being parent-friendly and transparent.

His leadership style is distributive whenever possible, with an emphasis on building trust. He tells his staff, “My job is to make sure you have the tools to do your work, because if you’re not successful, it’s ultimately my responsibility. I own that.” This attitude helps teachers and staff, as well as his four assistant principals, feel supported.

The service component of leadership drives Principal D. He listens to people, observes what works, and pays special attention to what helps lift people. He serves his staff by empowering them to feel safe enough to innovate, think outside the box, and take action. Relationship-building engenders trust. That prevents people from becoming paralyzed by their fears.

Despite Principal D’s deliberate work to distribute leadership, his reality is that he is principal of a very large middle school. More “executive leadership” is required at times compared to “the hands-on treatment you would see from principals in small schools.” He cannot name everyone in his school, and that is problematic for him. However, he does get into every classroom during every week. He may not know all of his students, but they know him. High visibility is an important aspect of his leadership.

His visibility and accessibility extend to parents, as well. Principal D described a night when he was working late. The phone rang, and he was the only one there to answer it. The parent expressed relief, “Thank God somebody answered the phone! My kid brought home the wrong book and his homework’s due tomorrow.” This was an opportunity to practice his philosophy about customer service. He is working to bring the school around to a *single point of*

contact approach, which means that if someone calls the school, they do not get transferred from one place to the other to get their question answered or their need fulfilled. According to Principal D, with a single point of contact approach “the person who answers the phone takes care of them from start to finish.” That may mean taking their number, researching their question, then getting back to them. In this particular case, Principal D arranged to unlock the building (not the one where his office is) and meet the parent there to allow access to the child’s locker. He believes this approach is a starting point for improving an image problem the school has in the community.

Principal D is willing to be vulnerable in the service of modeling a growth mindset for teachers. He had teachers take a survey about his leadership last spring. He wanted their feedback for the purpose of helping him ensure that his focus was where it needed to be. At this beginning of the current school year he set professional goals based on the results of the survey and shared these goals with the staff, asking them to help him monitor his growth. By transparently and publicly setting his own goals and including his teachers in progress monitoring, he is effectively demonstrating a growth mindset and cycle of goal-setting for his teachers. Principal B believes we are all mission driven, but he thinks that principals often do not make use of all of components it takes to get there.

School and district overview. School D is located in central Illinois, closer to Interstate 64 than to Interstate 80, in a city that was once a heavy industrial and manufacturing locale, now regarded as a commercial center for a large agricultural area. The 2014 Illinois School Report Card identifies School D as 58% White, 29% Black, 9% multiracial, 3% Hispanic, and 1% belonging to two other racial/ethnic categories. Overall proficiency on the ISAT is reported at 43% and 62% of students are reported as low-income. The attendance rate for School D is

93.1%, less than the state average, and parent contact is reported at 98.5%. Seven elementary schools feed into this middle school, which serves all students from sixth through eighth grades district-wide (see Appendix K).

Expressed purposes of parent-school partnerships, both in general and during transition. The experiences parents have with staff are what build their confidence level in the school, according to Principal D. He explains that relationships are not based on what you know or how good you think you are. Relationships come down to the feeling a parent has when interacting with a teacher, a custodian, a bus driver, or the principal. He looks for every opportunity to connect parents to the school, admitting that this is a challenge when there is a lack of trust on the part of parents or when parents work two or three jobs.

School D has an active Parent Teacher Group (PTG) that is currently more focused on fundraising than collaboration. Principal D would like to see the organization move into more of an principal advisory role, but he acknowledges, “That will take some work.”

Parent Informational Meetings (PIM) have proved to be an effective avenue for bringing parents into the building, engaging them in two-way communication, informing them of school improvement initiatives, and connecting parents to one another. These quarterly meetings take place for one hour in the early evening. Parents are encouraged to submit agenda items to Principal D for inclusion. These well-attended meetings provide Principal D with an opportunity to get a sense of the people he serves. The meetings also provide the hundreds of parents in attendance with a chance to get a better understanding of who Principal D is and what he stands for. Principal D also gets to know the community through relationships he has established with local churches.

The high attendance at the PIMs is not an indication of overall parent involvement, however. Principal D feels that he is in the same boat as most principals, in that regard. He has to work hard to get parents involved most of the time. With regard to parent volunteers, he says, “We wear the same parents who always volunteer out. In our case, that’s the stay-at-home moms. We’re just wearing them out.”

A present concern of Principal D’s is the dingy appearance of the school. He wants parents to be able to sense what is valued when they enter. There needs to be a sense that students are important. Parents may not understand everything about curriculum, but they know if you care about their child. Principal D expects to “put some energy into the building appearance” in the near future. He says, “There’s no second shot at a first impression.”

From a parent perspective, the transition period is that first impression. Principal D believes that transitions are as much about perception as anything for both student and parent. He cites trust as the main objective for involving parents in the process of moving children to a middle school setting that includes multiple classes and teachers, a big new building, and lockers. He thinks the parents want information academic and extracurricular opportunities for their children, and they want to know where to go when there is a problem. He wants to get the message out that he values parents’ opinions because they are the experts on their children.

Transition practices: Timeline and activities. The transition process at School D begins for fifth grade students in January with a social event. Formal transition activities end in mid-August with the sixth grade orientation for parents and students, which takes place on the first contracted workday for teachers.

January. The transition period will kick off this year with a fifth grade dance at the middle school. This is a new event designed to be a joyful introduction for incoming students

and parents. All fifth grade students and parents will be invited to share in food, music, and dancing. This event is the result of Principal D brainstorming with his PTG. They were looking for a way to raise participation at dances and involve parents even before their children entered the middle school. Sixth through eighth grade parents will serve as the volunteers, enabling fifth grade parents to mingle and get to know one another. According to Principal D, “Students and parents will bounce back and forth between the gym and the cafeteria. It could be mayhem, but we’re excited about it.”

February. Principal D does behind the scenes groundwork with the elementary principals. Student information is shared for the purpose of planning for the scheduling process and determining which students will need interventions. Principal D explains that he wants to be sure that students are properly placed so they do not spend the first month figuring out if a child needs help.

End of February-beginning of March. Principal D and two of his four assistant principals begin their visits to all fifth grade classes in their seven feeder schools. Each of the middle school administrators presents on topics of interest to the fifth grade students. This is an overview of the middle school structure designed to welcome the students and begin their relationship with the middle school. Says Principal D, “We get to know them; they get to know us.”

May. All fifth grade students take a field trip to the middle school during the school day. There are a variety of activities designed to help incoming students feel comfortable at the big school. Also around this time, parochial school families are considering the middle school as an option for their soon-to-be sixth grader. Principal D will arrange for these families to take individual tours of the building. Last year he arranged for 50 individual tours for families whose children were either already attending public schools in the district or those from the private

schools who were considering making the shift to public education. He also allows potential students to shadow current students when that is requested. He wants families to be able to make an informed decision.

August. Sixth Grade Orientation takes place in mid-August on the first workday for teachers. It is an open house of sorts where sixth grade students and their parents (sometimes their whole families) receive their schedules and tour the school. There are so many people there at once, that Principal D is considering separating parents and students in the future. He will have parents attend presentations in classrooms, while students will be in the gym engaged in team building activities.

Parents are physically present at the first activity (the January dance) and the last transition activity (sixth grade orientation). Principal D begins communicating in a big way with incoming parents in July when the schedule rolls over. At that point, the new sixth graders are on his distribution list and he can e-blast lots of information to the parents.

When the school year begins, sixth grade parents and children join in the activities of the school as a whole. There are many opportunities for parents and students to attend evening programs such as: science night, reading night along with the book fair, health fair, and fitness night. There are many non-traditional families in the district, so they were trying to engage grandparents through a shadow day, but that program phased out. Principal D would like these events to be better attended. He notes that the sixth grade typically has the best turnout of parents than any other grade.

Future transitions: Plans and dreams. Principal D would like his current transition activities to evolve by creating programs within programs that would differentiate approaches to serve the many and varied needs of his students and parents. His enrollment is large enough to

create sub-groups for existing activities. He envisions a transition process that is deeper, but not necessarily bigger, “Parents are not interested in coming to 12 transition activities. More is not necessarily better. I just think we need to do better at what we currently have.”

His thoughts about future transitions reflect back to work he did previously in another district that involved his social worker in a support group for parents of struggling students. Principal D thinks this type of program would transfer nicely to the middle school transition. Groups of parents could be identified according to the specific needs of their children and they could meet with the guidance of the social worker or other personnel to address their specific concerns for transition to middle level. Principal D believes there is great power in providing opportunities for peer-to-peer sharing and support.

In his dream world, Principal D would add a week-long transition activity that would involve incoming sixth grade students in a low ropes course, team building activities, and school-based orientation. This would occur two weeks prior to the start of school. On four of the days, students would take a bus to a park where certified instructors would lead students through the low ropes course and team building activities, in the service of initiating relationships and bonding. On the last day of that week, teachers would engage with students at the school site in order to continue building relationships and, also, to orient students to routines such as getting their lockers ready and schedule walks. The last day would include parents in a culminating nighttime program complete with bonfire and barbeque. This is a costly program that is similar to one that he created previously in another district. He has even heard of schools that do four-day camping trips as part of their transition process. Principal D believes that these expensive programs offer strong transitions that support camaraderie among students and staff, but recognizes how rare they are in struggling communities.

Principal E.

The principal, self-described: Attitudes and leadership style. Unlike many of today's administrators, Principal E enjoyed a prolonged teacher career prior to pursuing administration. Fully half of his long career was spent in the classroom. In his current role, Principal E envisions himself as the catalyst who brings together and unites all stakeholders. His role includes promoting many types of partnerships. He is the face of the school and holds himself responsible for communicating all that is going on in the school and being a role model for what he expects from all members of his school community.

His guiding philosophy is a variation on doing what is best for kids: "We need to see what we're about and where we're going through the students." Principal E takes seriously his part in inspiring students and getting them excited about being at middle school. His commitment to building relationships with students is apparent when he walks down the halls and they are the ones initiate greetings. When disciplinary matters do arise, it is these relationships that allow students to view him as trustworthy and caring.

Principal E explains that a big part of his job is to create a climate of trust in the school. He wants all stakeholders to trust they will feel safe and comfortable at School E. He wants parents to know that communication will be timely and helpful. He believes that a principal must first have a vision, a purpose. Then it is necessary to gain ownership of that vision by all stakeholders, which can only occur through a climate of trust. The principal then builds capacity to work toward the vision. It is his job to support students, parents, and teachers throughout the growth process that is informed by the vision.

Principal E's vision is student-focused. He directs the process of serving students by working with others to empower them as the school moves forward as one. He envisions himself

a transformational leader who guides a collaborative effort, hears all voices, and empowers others through leadership opportunities. In this way he creates ownership by all stakeholders. This is important because, as Principal E says, “I can’t see it all. I don’t know it all. I do have a viewpoint, but there are many other viewpoints that need to be heard.”

He is also a servant leader in the sense that he views those who work in the school as “guests of the community.” The children they serve are “the prized commodity of the community.” As principal, he assumes the responsibility of “providing students with every opportunity possible to be as successful as they can and to grow in all the ways that are possible.” According to Principal E, there is no way to accomplish that without vision and strong partnerships with the parents and community at large.

School and district overview. School E is located in a suburb of Chicago that is a commercial and residential community with a population of over 30,000. Principal E describes it as a predominantly middle to upper middle class white-collar community. The 2014 Illinois School Report Card identifies School E as 84% White, 8% Hispanic, 4% Asian, 3% multiracial, and 1% belonging to three other racial/ethnic categories. Overall proficiency on the ISAT is reported at 81% and 9% of students are reported as low-income. The attendance rate for School E is 96.7% and parental contact is reported at 100%. Three elementary schools feed into School E, which is one of two middle schools in the district, both with grades 6-8 configurations (see Appendix K).

Expressed purposes of parent-school partnerships, both in general and during transition. According to Principal E, “Good foundations on the front end of a relationship allow for difficult conversations later, because you have that relationship.” This pragmatic *means to an*

end outcome of relationship building is a common theme among participants in this study.

Principal E expands this frame of thought,

I found so often that when a situation arises, if I know the parent and they trust me, trust the staff, trust us, they give you the benefit of the doubt. When we make a mistake or when they have a question, the interaction will be positive, unless they don't know or trust us. I think relationships are the key. They are positive partners with us when they know that we are looking out for their kid.

Principal E aspires to open and honest conversations with all parents. His door is always open and he is readily available to answer parents' questions, discuss their concerns, find out how they feel about school initiatives, and to bring people together. He believes it is important for parents to have opportunities to express themselves and share what is important to them.

There are formal parent advisory structures in place in District E at both the district and building levels. Parent forums meet with the leadership team about topics like technology and the school handbook. Committees are set up as needs and initiatives arise. This looks a bit more informal at the building level, where Principal E brings parents in as needed regarding topics that affect student learning. At times he will solicit specific parents based on their skill sets. Other times, he opens up the process to all who are interested. According to Principal E, "We tend to have a decent response, but we also tend to see the same people a lot. To get different individuals, you more or less have to personally invite them.

Parent volunteerism is an option at School E. Principal E maintains an open invitation for parents to become involved in the school in a wide range of ways. Parents often work in classrooms under teacher supervision. They may read with a student or proctor tests. Other responsibilities may involve parents in monitoring areas of the school or managing aspects of the Library Resource Center (LRC). Principal E acknowledges that parent volunteerism declines at the middle school level. An exception to this would be parent presentations on career

development days when parents are invited to teach students about their jobs and how they relate to middle school subject areas.

Principal E is emphatic that the transition period is all about “starting out on the right foot in terms of trust.” He explains that the transition of “coming to the big school” is scary for both parents and their children. His job is to make it less so, in order to calm parents so that they will be advocates for the middle school. The goal is to earn parents’ trust by means of a meaningful transition process.

The trust-building transition process includes providing parents with lots of information. Parents learn about academic and extracurricular offerings and what the structure of the school day looks like. Principal E also educates parents about what to expect during the developmental phase of early adolescence and how the middle school philosophy is aligned to that growth process.

During the transition period, parents hear that their presence is valued at the school. Principal E shares all the ways in which they may become involved. They are also provided with clear direction about communication procedures at the middle school. They are told that, when they reach out to the school, every effort is made to respond quickly. Principal E says, “We want them to call with their questions and know that they will not be turned away.” Parents are expected to advocate for their children at School E. During the transition, Principal E assures parents that school staff understands that each child is different and that each situation needs to be handled in an individualized manner. Children’s needs are met at School E.

Principal E’s goals for parent-school partnerships at the time of transition will be met when he sees evidence that parents are less anxious about their children moving up to middle school, when parents are more proactive than reactive, and when parents believe that their

children will be in a place in which they will be looked after and will enjoy positive learning opportunities. He adds that when the parent is less anxious, this has a positive effect on the child. Toward this end, his approach throughout the transition process is transparent. Parents will know what to expect every step of the way. The transition process at School E is designed to be a family experience.

Transition practices: Timeline and activities. The transition process at School E begins internally in December, but fifth grade students and their families are not involved until January. Formal transition activities formally conclude in September with *Parent Night*.

December. Principal E sends confidential forms to the fifth grade teachers requesting basic information about their students, including test scores, areas of strength and weakness, and special requests (perhaps they need to be placed with a friend for support or separated from someone due to a history of conflict). The idea is to gather enough information to inform the scheduling process and place students optimally.

January. The transition period kicks off for students and parents at *Fifth Grade Parent Night* in mid-January. They meet with Principal E in the multi-purpose room for an introduction to all things middle school. Among the topics covered are: schedules, team structure, curriculum, exploratory class offerings, and clubs. Parents receive a comprehensive informational packet to take home for later reference. *Fifth Grade Parent Night* begins at 6:30 p.m. and is followed at 7:30 by the *All School Open House*. Fifth grade parents and students are encouraged to stay for the Open House in order to learn more about all that goes on at middle school. Electives boards are up at this time so parents can learn more about the many course offerings, and older students are available to share information about the clubs they participate in.

Also in January, parents are mailed a form asking for information about their child, not dissimilar from what teachers completed in December. Parents will have the opportunity to share their child's likes, dislikes, and learning style. This is also the place for them to choose a foreign language to be studied in sixth grade: Spanish or French.

February. Principal E meets with the principal and fifth grade teachers from each of the feeder schools to discuss each student individually. This takes place at the middle school. Selected staff members from the middle school also attend. This includes the social worker and lead teacher from each of the core subject areas. These meetings take place over 3 days, one for each feeder school. The goal is to ensure that any necessary student information is communicated to middle school staff prior to scheduling. At the end of this process, student teams are determined with care to balancing them demographically and academically. Principal E explains that this is an important step because optimal scheduling is a key contributor to a child's success at middle level.

March. Principal E holds a student assembly at each feeder school where he reviews the structure of the middle school and talks about homework expectations, what the day will look like, and many other middle school topics of interest to the students. He throws middle school t-shirts into the crowd at each school to get the students excited. Also around this time, Principal E presents at one area parochial school from which they get about 10 transfer students a year.

June. After promotion exercises, the eighth grade students do not return for the last few days of the school year. It is during this time that the fifth grade students visit the middle school to eat lunch (during what was the eighth grade lunch period), tour the school, and engage in a question and answer session with current student volunteers.

August. For the first time this summer, Principal E opened the school to students and their parents for two days during which they came to the building, got their schedules, walked their schedules, set up their lockers, found their homerooms, and in general, just became more comfortable with the lay of the land. Parents were informed about this option via a letter mailed to their home. A map of the school was included in this mailing. This was a voluntary activity. No sign-up was required. The two days were offered during separate weeks so as not to exclude families who had vacations scheduled. Only Principal E and his assistant principal, along with office staff, were present. The office was open for paperwork on these days.

The purpose of this new venture was to contribute to an atmosphere of trust. There was a community feel to the event, as students were happy seeing their friends and parents got to meet and greet their friends and neighbors. The parent feedback about this event was overwhelmingly positive. There were parents and students who so appreciated this experience that they attended both days. Principal E reports that parents expressed a sense of relief and calm: “Okay, this makes sense. Now I get it. My kid’s going to be safe. They’re not going to get lost.” Some parents wished that their older children could have had this experience.

Principal E also did 15 to 20 individual walk-throughs with people (children and/or parents) who had high anxiety or special needs. This is a labor-intensive endeavor as the building is so big that it takes about an hour to do a thorough tour. Families coming in from parochial schools are not as concerned about the building as they are about the public school environment. During these tours, Principal E engages the students in conversation. Parents typically ask most of the questions. These are great opportunities for him to get to know parents and their children. Principal E believes that this personal effort pays off ten-fold in terms of relationship building.

September. Parent Night marks the formal end of the transition process. The whole school attends, but parents meet solely with their child's team. The classrooms at School E are modular, so walls can be moved to accommodate whole teams in an enlarged room for presentations. Sixth grade parents meet with the four teachers on their child's team in this large group setting. These are not parent-teacher conferences. Teachers of elective courses also make presentations. Attendance for parents of sixth graders is always high at this event.

Although the formal transition has ended at this point, Principal E notes that students are still transitioning individually according to their own needs until the end of the first trimester. Following the formal transition period, parents and students become part of the school culture at large, participating in the many activities that are offered, including: student theater and music performances, and in-school field trips that parents are invited to. *Rachel's Challenge* is a social emotional program that actively involves parents at all grades. Sixth grade parents are required to attend parent teacher conferences in the fall and in the spring.

Future transitions: Plans and dreams. Principal E is pleased with his transition process as it stands, but he plans to continue fine tuning it in the future, as he has done each year. He believes that this most recent transition has been his best yet. For the next iteration, he is considering expanding the two-day August window when families have access to the building. This could be a time to get more start-up details out of the way, such as distribution of Chromebooks to students. Principal E also wonders if there is more or different information that is needed from fifth grade parents and teachers to ensure a smooth transition. A lot of student information is currently collected, but perhaps there is a need for further detail. He notes that it is important to avoid creating preconceptions about students based on information that may be in

flux or skewed. Students need as clean a slate as possible when they enter middle school, so it is important for him to be sure that the information they are collecting is appropriate and useful.

If money were no object, Principal E would love to have a summer social event for incoming students. He would also consider having teachers present on the two summer days that parents and students walk the building in August, if he could find a way to pay them.

Principal F.

The principal, self-described: Attitudes and leadership style. Principal F enjoys the personal relationships he has with people. Positive feedback he receives from parents paints him as real and genuine. He explains that perhaps he can be genuine to a fault, because he “doesn’t hide [his] cards.” He also does not play political games. When he makes a bad decision, he owns it, and according to Principal F, he has “made plenty of bad decisions.” He lives his life knowing that he will never “arrive,” as he is always evolving.

With humility, he gives credit for School F’s positive school culture to his predecessors. Principal F accepts credit for fostering that positive culture and even enhancing it as he evolves in his leadership role, but is well aware that he could destroy it at any time, particularly with regard to parent-school partnerships. His core beliefs of “children first—it’s that simple,” and his insistence on protecting instructional time guide his actions and decisions.

Over time Principal F has learned much about himself and how he interacts with others. He believes that words of affirmation have a positive effect on many people, including him. If he presents positively, people share positive things back. He wants parents to know who he is, what he believes, and what the school’s philosophy is. Principal F considers himself an ambassador for the school, publically touting the wonderful things the school does, which are many. He is

accessible to parents and he responds readily to their emails and phone calls. He is a receptive listener. Effective communication enhances credibility; he has earned his reputation.

A current concern of Principal F's is the idea of social justice in his affluent school community. There are a small number of families who are economically disadvantaged. He described a situation where he stepped in when a parent did not have the capacity to advocate for her child. He believes school leaders have a special responsibility to those who struggle to help themselves and he worries about the potential for lack of awareness when families are falling between the cracks. He thinks about the social justice aspect of his practice every day, but feels that he has not done as much about it as he could.

Principal F believes that leadership is most effective when it is shared. He describes School F as having an environment where teachers and parents know that they are trusted and empowered, are heard, and are a valued part of the team. It is that sense of ownership that brings out great ideas and commitment to the work. When work is done in a collaborative mode, his role is to constantly model his expectations, mediate stressors, and continuously monitor institutional capacity. He sometimes has to put the brakes on some of ideas that are proposed in order to maintain focus and balance in the school.

Principal leadership is an evolving process, according to Principal F. He continues to read and learn about leadership theory. He believes that being a quality principal means listening to many people and making decisions that are, first and foremost, in the best interest of children, but that also meet the needs of all members of the school community.

School and district overview. School F is located in an affluent suburban district within the greater Chicagoland area. The community is mainly residential with a population of over 8,000. The 2014 Illinois School Report Card identifies School F as 83% White, 8% Hispanic, 6%

Asian, 3% multiracial, and less than 1% in other racial/ethnic categories. Overall proficiency on the ISAT is reported at 90% and 4% of students are reported as low-income. The attendance rate for School F is 95.7% and parental contact is reported at 100%. Three elementary schools feed into School F, which is one of two middle schools in the district, both with grades 6-8 configurations (see Appendix K).

Expressed purposes of parent-school partnerships, both in general and during transition.

Parents can be your eyes and ears. They can be your greatest supporters or they can be your greatest detractors, so you want to hear them. And I think that when we implement their ideas we empower them as partners. (Principal F)

Principal F's core belief is that the parents are every child's primary educators. It is important to listen, work, and collaborate with them. Fostering parent-school partnerships is an aspect to his job that he deems critical.

Many parent-school partnership activities at School F, in general, are supported by the very active Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), with which Principal F has a positive, collaborative relationship. This organization supports the school mission and is an outlet where parents can support children and the school to their fullest effort. Meetings take place monthly and are held in the morning. For a time, evening meetings were explored in an attempt to reach working parents, but attendance declined. Fifty or more parents typically attend these meetings, which begin with a brief business portion followed by a presentation by an outside speaker about a topic of interest to parents. A teacher attends each meeting and reports back to the faculty. The PTO is a key player in bringing parents into the building, a partnership goal that Principal F values.

PTO meetings and activities provide Principal F with numerous opportunities to connect with parents and enhance his personal relationships with them, above and beyond the scope of

his other responsibilities. The PTO coordinates volunteer opportunities at School F, including work in the Media Resource Center (MRC) where parents restock shelves and put up bulletin boards, among other things. Parents may also work with Principal F to initiate volunteer work that they perceive as needed.

The social workers at School F work closely with families in need. They develop relationships with all families and, when parents require financial assistance, social workers lead the effort. The annual eighth grade trip to Washington, DC is costly, but the school makes every effort to exclude no one. There are some families that need coats for their children in the winter. Sometimes behind-the-scenes relationships can be most meaningful. Parents contribute to an Angel Fund and social workers distribute the financial assistance confidentially. There is a sense on the part of recipients and donors alike that they are all part of a wonderful community.

Principal F reflected on his early days as an administrator before he understood the value of parent-school partnerships. He started out with “black and white, top down thinking” and has grown to a point where he creates and values long-term partnerships with families that are “built on trust and a real sense of ownership.” He understands that research shows that when families are connected to schools, their children perform better.

In addition to his purposes for parent-school partnerships in general, Principal F adds a few goals specific to elementary to middle school transitions. He sees it as his role to help students connect to each other and the school, and he wants parents to do the same. He believes that parent connections are key to a thriving school community. Principal F also thinks it is important to impart as much information to parents during the transition period as possible. Frontloading of expectations, procedures, policies, philosophies, and traditions helps parents feel that they are in the know. This reduces anxiety and helps create an optimal experience for

students on the first day. Parents have given high marks to School F's transition program but, in Principal F's opinion, the best reviews are registered when parents see their children's smiles as they arrive home after the first day of school.

Transition practices: Timeline and activities. Principal F is involved in internal fifth grade transition practices throughout the school year. These internal activities include the attendance of Principal F at all annual reviews for fifth grade students and at meetings of elementary school social workers, middle school social workers, and fifth grade teachers for the purpose of conveying confidential information to the middle school to support the scheduling of students. He also attends the PTO meetings of all elementary feeder schools in the spring. Individual transition meetings include parents of students with special needs, also throughout the fifth grade year. Much of this internal work revolves around the scheduling process. Principal F views this extensive planning as an important aspect of his leadership: "If I can have all the information I need, then we can create the best set of classes for each child. Then, quite frankly, we're setting everyone up for success: students, teachers, and parents." Transition activities for parents and students at large run from April of the fifth grade year through October of the sixth grade year.

April. Fifth Grade Parent Night begins at 6:30 p.m. in the cafeteria with a welcome and introductions by Principal F. He shares the history of the school and talks about the shared value system, philosophy, and deep traditions of the middle school. The evening's leadership is distributed. Principal F is the one who shares accolades about the school and talks about middle school as being a unique time in a child's development, how students enter School F as little boys and girls and leave as young men and women. He then turns the evening over to his staff,

empowering them and building capacity in the organization. He tells parents, “These are the good people you’re going to be working with. They will take excellent care of your children.”

Parents then break out into 15-minute sessions with teachers and social workers to learn more about the school. Topics include: school handbook and rules, advisory program, course offerings, social-emotional learning of the early adolescent, and opportunities for parent involvement.

May. All fifth grade students visit the middle school for two hours in the middle of the day on a Friday for *Step Up Day*. According to Principal F, “That’s a really neat day. They eat hot lunch in our cafeteria. They get to order pizza or cheeseburgers and sit with their friends.” After lunch they are split into groups (alphabetically) and take a tour of the school. Then they sit down with two or three current sixth grade students for a question and answer session. Fifth grade students also attend a general meeting where key staff members and teachers are introduced. Principal F shared that he has heard students say, “I was really nervous coming here, but this is great.” He feels that students leave this visit excited and ready for middle school.

It is important to note that in the past, the *Step Up Day* was in April and the *Fifth Grade Parent Night* was in May. Parent feedback caused Principal F to reflect and make the switch. The parents had a need to be in the leadership role with their children, who had lots of questions that parents could not yet answer. Although parents now meet first, they may still not have all the answers, but they now know whom to contact with their questions. This change has allowed parents to feel more comfortable and less anxious about the transition.

Also in May Principal F, accompanied by the social worker, visits all fifth grade classrooms at the three feeder schools.

August. Back to School Day is for all students, but sixth graders are assigned a separate timeframe from the older students. This important day in the life of middle school students and parents at School F takes place a week before school starts. During the three-hour period, they complete everything possible to allow them to enter the school on the first day ready to learn. This is the day students receive their schedules, locks, lockers, and bus routes. They take their school pictures and walk their schedules. Parents sign up for the PTO, fill out directory information, and take care of other business in the gymnasium. Lockers are assigned and school supplies are picked up. Students and parents can drop in at any time during their assigned timeframe; the entire process takes no more than 45 minutes. Principal F attributes the success of this program to “the army of PTO volunteers who support it.” The entire process moves right along and lines are kept to a minimum. In addition to all of the business that is completed on that day, community organizations are set up at tables for parents and students to visit. These organizations offer a range of offerings, including after school programs.

During the week between *Back to School Day* and the first day of school, the doors to the school are open for parents and students to come in and do self-tours, work on lockers, take care of scheduling errors, and wrap up any other loose ends.

September. Sixth Grade Curriculum Night takes place from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. during the second week in September. It is held on a different night from the seventh and eighth grades. Principal F and his assistant principal begin with an introduction that includes the shared philosophy and beliefs of the school community and facts and figures about the school, including interesting tidbits about what they stand for (e.g., as a “green movement” school, there are more recycling bins than garbage cans in the building). School procedures are presented via *PowerPoint*. After this spirited start to the evening, parents are set loose to follow their

children's schedules. They start their "day" with advisory, then move through each period in an abbreviated manner: seven minute periods, three minute passing periods. Teachers make brief presentations during these shortened periods. Parents wear nametags so that teachers can begin knowing which parents belong to which students. An email sent home in advance of this event informs parents that this is not the time for conferencing with teachers. Those who are anxious or have other needs may schedule individual conferences for another time.

Also in September, the PTO facilitates the *Clubs and Activities Fair*. Tables for each school club are set up in the cafeteria manned by club sponsors along with several selected student representatives. There may be activities occurring at the club tables, for example, the Chess Club has chess games going on. The PTO creates a one-page flyer with all of the clubs and activities listed, including the days they meet, name of the sponsor, and the sponsor's email address. Popcorn and water are provided, so students come down around 3:00 p.m., get some popcorn, and walk around looking at all of the offerings. They typically stay about 40 minutes and can finish in time to ride the late bus home. Some parents also attend, in addition to those who are volunteering. When students get home, they can begin to process the club offerings with their parents and try to figure out what they want to do. Principal F purposely holds off the start of club activities until October, so students can first focus on a strong academic start of the year.

October. The first PTO meeting of the year marks the end of the formal transition period. Principal F is the guest speaker for this particular meeting each year, and his presentation is entitled *Middle School 101*. In this comprehensive presentation he covers a broad range of middle school topics. Parents learn about their child's emotional development, school curricula and procedures, assessment information, and a most interesting topic, *The Hidden Curricula*. This is where parents find out where students sit on the bus and why, and what their children

need to know about changing in the locker room. Unlike most of the cases in this study where parent attendance can be a challenge, School F boasts high parent turnout for events such as this. Sixty parents attended the first PTO meeting this year. Parent feedback about this program is consistently positive.

Following the formal transition period, parents and students become part of the school culture at large, participating in the many activities that are offered, including numerous team and simulation days when parents volunteer (e.g., *Immigrant Day* and *World War II Day*). Like School E, School F also participates in *Rachel's Challenge*, a social emotional program that actively involves parents at all grades. Parents are invited to supervise sixth grade field trips, but that is the last grade at which parent supervision of trips is considered developmentally appropriate. Two parent representatives coordinate volunteers at each grade level, however volunteer opportunities for parents of sixth grade students differ from opportunities at the seventh and eighth grades.

Future transitions: Plans and dreams. One of Principal F's long-standing goals was to work toward helping parents connect to each other. This goal has just been launched through the newly established PTO committee for new families. After hearing him talk about this need, two parents who are both relatively new to the community initiated the formation of this committee. They understood the need for parents to connect based on their own experiences and worked with the principal to get the ball rolling. The first activity, a meet and greet in a parent's home, recently launched this endeavor. Principal F hopes this committee's work will continue in a way that enhances the transition experience of parents who are new to the school by providing inviting activities that immerse them into the culture of the community.

There are no major changes to the existing transition activities on the horizon. Principal F believes that the program has already evolved substantially and is in a good place. That does not mean that reflection and ongoing improvement will not continue. One thing that he plans to do beginning next year is to track which families are attending activities and which are not. If people are missing, he needs to figure out why and be sure they are being served.

Themes

The metaphor of principal as community builder is the umbrella under which the components of my conceptual framework are organized. As discussed in chapter 3, this framework was intended as a starting point for data collection and analysis. During the coding phase of data analysis, initial themes were posited as a reflection of the framework. Others emerged as the analysis process progressed.

I previously discussed how the various *bins* within the conceptual framework were used in the development of initial questions for interviews. The semi-structured interview process allowed for variance and divergence from the prepared interview questions. If a participant led an interview question down an interesting path, I doubled back to that path with other participants during subsequent interviews. The questions for the final interview of the study were developed as a result of participants' responses from the previous two interviews. Due to this semi-structured and evolving process, each participant engaged more intently with some questions over others. In the reporting, there is not uniformity among participants with regard to depth of response to all questions.

What began conceptually as bins segued into *nodes* and *child nodes* in the analysis phase using NVivo. For the purpose of reporting, the terms of bins and nodes will now be replaced with the less technical term, *themes*.

My broadly stated research question seeks to describe how nominated middle level principals foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle school. This *how* question allowed for the exploration and description of participants' attitudes, purposes, and practices. Therefore, embedded in the research question is the opportunity to explore the *who* of the participants' attitudes and beliefs, the *why* of their purposes for fostering exemplary parent-school partnerships, and the *how* of their practices during the time of transition from elementary to middle level. As I analyzed the data, these *who*, *why*, and *how* descriptions coalesced into themes by which the data is reported here under the broad headings of: participants' attitudes and beliefs, participants' purposes for building parent-school partnerships, and participants' parent-school partnership practices, including transition.

Individual cases were described in detail in the first section of this chapter, with a major focus on the transition activities timeline, in answer to the *how* question. Patterns can only emerge in the aggregate, so through the organization of themes, it is possible to see here the responses of participants along a continuum of attitude, purpose, and practice—and to illuminate areas of broad similarity or difference. Another purpose of aggregation is to maintain the confidentiality of participants. Participants are most often identified by their letter assignments throughout the following thematic sections, however the few responses that could lead to identification of a participant when combined with even the broad demographic information provided in the previous section, are reported solely thematically, without identification.

The research question is thoroughly described in this chapter. It is important to repeat that other tangential reporting surrounding attitudes and beliefs of principals, parent-school partnerships, and practices of the principal is included. While some of the reporting is not specific to the time of transition, it is included here to the extent that it enhances an understanding of the unit of study.

Who: Participants' attitudes and beliefs. It is remarkable that every interview with every participant was characterized by his or her consistency. Over the course of three interviews, it was not unusual to find principals repeating their own words verbatim. Some noted their consistency as a matter of practice developed over time, claiming awareness of and fidelity to their words and actions. Others attributed this consistency to a strong system of values. In a word, these participants demonstrated integrity, without exception.

The themes discussed in this section describe a range of attitudes and beliefs that contribute to the expression of participants' character. Before examining the topics of relationships, influences, leadership style, and professional reflection, an interesting starting point will first cover a topic tangential to this study that spurred almost unanimous agreement and a bit of gnashing of semantic teeth. There was no specific interview question about this aspect of the job of the principal, yet every participant brought it up in some form. Principal A describes his concern:

[A colleague] will make the comment all the time; he'll say, "I do what's best for kids," and that just makes me cringe. And that sounds awful because I *do* want to do what's best for kids. I sincerely care about all of the kids in this building. I love these kids. I love people and I love community. But I don't think of it as doing what's best for kids. I look at myself as serving an organization. (Principal A)

Principal A presciently informed me that I would hear the phrase *doing what's best for kids* from my other study participants. He cared about this because he is particular with his words. This phrase has become a pet peeve for him. I did hear this from every other participant,

but it was differently nuanced each time. Participants often used these words as a catch phrase, as is typically done in schools, where it is often thought of as a guiding principle for teachers and administrators. As is evident from the quotation above, Principal A cares about his students and he believes that, if asked, his teachers would say that he consistently does do what is best for kids. His sincere concern is that he feels deeply troubled when he is in a position to make a decision that may not be good for a particular student, yet is good for others. Therefore, he carefully expresses his belief that he serves the organization and does the most he can for the greatest number of people.

While the other principals in the study did proclaim the importance of doing what is best for kids, often as a guiding principle, they often included caveats. One example of this is when Principal D was given the advice to “make decisions that are best for kids. You may not always be right, but you’ll always be able to defend your position,” a statement that he has grown to understand as his practice has developed. This idea of doing what is right while maintaining accountability came up frequently across many discussions. Other principals acknowledged that while they aimed to do what was best for their students, it was not always easy to know exactly what that should be or how to do it. As will be discussed in the section about professional reflection, principals understand that they are sometimes wrong.

This brief example serves as an introduction to the value of thematically aggregating the data of this study. As will be discussed in this chapter, communication is a critical aspect of a principal’s job. These participants agree that words are to be chosen carefully, and throughout the interview process they each communicated with a distinct style that was informed by a set of values. This will be apparent in the differentiated descriptions of themes in the following sections.

Importance of relationships.

School is like a family. Everyone is cared for. I want to run a building that is positive, nurturing, and academically excellent. I encourage teachers to create relationships with parents early on when things are good. And when things aren't good and situations occur, because they *will* occur, get to the parents right away. You have an established partnership, so you can have a conversation and work together to make things better. (Principal B)

A frequently used word by all participants across all interviews was: *Trust*. Principal A makes it plain, "The purpose of relationships is establishing trust." According to Principal D, building trust takes time and requires legwork, but "you can't get to adult improvement until you get to adult trust."

There is a *means to an end* spin that is apparent here regarding relationships, and this attitude will be applied by many participants to many topics raised in this study. They are, after all, doing a job. While building relationships in service of establishing trust may seem altruistic, and principals' values may, in fact, be altruistic, they do not lose sight of the fact that they are doing a job that involves so much more than just the relationships. Principal C pragmatically states,

As the principal, you constantly have opportunities to guide the parent-school relationship for the purpose of better managing both the child and adult in the way they work with the school. It's all for the same cause, which is improving instruction and in the end, improving student learning. Everything's tied together.

Participants' comments about relationships ranged from descriptions of deep caring for students and families to the practical need for positive relationships when things go wrong. Principal E explains that he sometimes has to step into the role of "scary principal" with regard to disciplinary issues. At those times positive relationships are key. He wants parents to trust that he is fair and to know that he cares about their child. Principal B describes how the relationships she has formed with families make even expulsion hearings less difficult. Bitter as those

meetings may be, parents hug her when that difficult process is over because of the relationship they have.

Whatever the thought process regarding the purpose of relationships for any specific instance, all participants identified establishing and nurturing relationships as a priority among the complex web of tasks that make up the principalship. It was frequently expressed that although many tasks are completed by the principal each day, most of which don't seem to outwardly have anything to do with relationships, at some point everything really does have a parent component. Principal E explains,

Parents are a key part of everything I do. No matter what I do, no matter what goes on in the school, I need to always have parent relationships in the forefront of my mind. If we're talking about the hundreds of things I do every day and am responsible for, relationships have to be in the top ten.

Principal C divides school leaders into two camps: those who engage with parents because it is just a rote part of their standard daily practice, like an afterthought, and those who actively and thoughtfully weave building relationships through everything they do. He believes that this type of leader is reflective and responsive. In straightforward *means to end* form, Principal A asserts, "Relationships have to be your top priority in order to achieve student growth." Principal D explains the logic behind this overwhelming agreement about the importance of relationships, "It's not until we engage people, until you build relationships, that things will change. Any organization, to be at its best, has to have those relationships run from top to bottom."

Influences and motivations.

Caring for students is a means to something bigger than just this job and my impact on kids. What gets me up in the morning and keeps me up late is that there's this: I truly believe there's this God-given purpose that I'm in the right spot and doing what I'm supposed to be doing. This is so much more than a job to me. (Principal F)

All participants described being shaped and influenced by either their value systems or life-changing mentors. Not a single participant expressed being motivated in their work for reasons of financial gain, prestige, or power (other than the power to impact students and families). Four of the six participants strongly expressed a sense of religious or spiritual mission associated with their position as principal. This theme emerged independent of my questioning. Principals A and F expressed an overtly religious motivation. Principal A clearly states his purpose, “My core values are serving people. I serve people because I’m a Christian. This [working as a school principal] is my mission.” Last summer he served on a mission trip in Nicaragua with 21 other educators. Even when he is not working at his official job, he is out in the world serving others by teaching. Other participants talked about the values by which they live their lives and approach their work, the way they find the good in situations, and how they feel blessed to do the work they do with children and their families. Principal E shared that he took a personality test while in a leadership academy that resulted in two recommended professions for him: education and the priesthood.

Principal F clearly described the epiphany he had while teaching science in the school district he attended as a child. He had been keeping in touch with a college friend who was doing missionary work in Sudan. One day she wrote to tell him that she had received a large grant to build schools for girls. He felt sad, realizing that she was doing amazing things and he was “just teaching science to upper middle class kids.” Then a sudden calm washed over him when he realized that his friend had been a student in a classroom very much like his. He could have an impact on perhaps 150 students a year. He began looking at each of his students as having the potential to make a difference in the world, and now, as a building leader, the reach of his impact creates even greater potential.

Participants were also motivated by significant mentor relationships. Several described principals who influenced them early in their teaching careers or later, during the early part of their administrative careers. These mentors were excellent role models who cared about them enough to provide encouragement and guidance. One's father was a principal, whose first question upon learning that his son planned to follow in his footsteps was, "Are you out of your mind?" Another named a career-changing college professor. Yet another named someone he does not know personally, Michelle Rhee, former Chancellor of the Washington DC public schools. He calls her "a very controversial woman," but respects her because she has gotten things done. All participants named books, post-graduate coursework, or professional development workshops as being influential and motivating.

Leadership style.

It's my role to provide the climate where people feel comfortable, so that their ideas are heard and valued. These ideas fold together to make the community. But that doesn't mean you're going to use one person's way or another person's way. In my opinion, it is an error when administrators push their own ideas and fail to hear the ideas of others. Let the process get to the great ideas, but then do a bit of both. But, sometimes the decisions have to be top down. (Principal C)

The overwhelming approach expressed by participants was that of a collaborative leadership style. Under the umbrella term of collaboration, principals were distributed on a continuum, with, on one end, a principal who sees himself as a top-down, directive leader who includes others when it serves the task to another describing himself as highly collaborative in many areas. Collaboration, while valued in most cases, was universally seen as fraught at times. Participants took great pains to describe the lengths they have gone to in order to be inclusive, while navigating the challenges inherent in a collaborative approach. They seem to battle the temptation of top down leadership with the knowledge that collaboration is important for building community and their school's ultimate success. It is important to note that this section is

about the principal's leadership style, in general, and may be applied to interactions with parents, teachers, students, and others.

Principal A has a strong belief system and vision. He explains, "I'm very much an action oriented person. This is what I was hired for, so I am expected to make things happen." He believes that his district chose him because they agree with his vision and they expect him to implement it. He is relatively new to the school, and during the first couple of years he was most comfortable making decisions alone and driving the school improvement process from the top down. While he is accountable for decision-making, he is an active listener to all members of the school community. He sees himself as collaborative in the sense that since he is charged with making things happen, that means that everyone is going to make things happen. He facilitates a team atmosphere in order to make things happen. While he is secure in his value system, he acknowledges, "Your philosophy of education changes over time by the people that you meet . . . it's not that the vision can't change, or we can't maybe shift a little bit."

Ideas can start anywhere, even with students, according to Principal B. She communicates readily with all stakeholders, but is careful that her leadership experience guides the conversations. She acknowledges that she was "probably a take control type of leader" when she first assumed the principalship. She has evolved into a leader who is comfortable delegating responsibility, and she continually "tweaks what goes on in the school based on input." While she considers her leadership to be collaborative and does not see herself as a micromanager, she has found that, at times, teachers and parents seem to prefer some micromanaging. There are times she still finds it challenging to be collaborative because sometimes she just wants to make the decision.

Principal D is an experienced administrator who is in his second year at his current school. He describes a leadership style that is distributive in order to build capacity. The collaborative process is evolving.

My wheelhouse is around school improvement and the change process. That's been my niche; it's just the water I swim in. When I was brought in for this job, I was tasked with building capacity. So a strategy that helps build capacity throughout the organization is to create leadership roles from top to bottom. When I engage with people and either delegate responsibilities or leadership, my role is to ensure their success. (Principal D)

He explains that he needed to do some "unilateral work" initially, but he will not make decisions without a sounding board. He provides parents and teachers with opportunities to advise, in the form of baby steps. He sometimes gives them two choices, knowing that he could live with either. Principal D believes that an organization must build capacity before becoming truly collaborative. He envisions parent involvement moving in that direction, but estimates that they are a year or two behind the teachers in their readiness. His role at this point is one of coaching and modeling. He clearly knows when a decision is his to make because it is "outside their realm." Principal D expresses his philosophy regarding collaboration as, "*I don't have to be right. We have to be right.*"

Principal E's role is that of a catalyst, which puts him firmly in the collaborative camp. He likes to keep the two-way communication flowing and sees himself as being accountable for making sure that people are aware and involved throughout the organization. This includes a lot of listening to all stakeholders to be sure that there are no false perceptions in the community. He states that a top down approach would prevent him from knowing what the community needs and how the stakeholders feel.

Principal F, like Principal B, describes an evolution in his leadership style over the years:

When I arrived at this school, I would have told you that I have the advanced degrees in education. I'm the one who knows best. I would have thought, "Parents, thank you for sharing, but this isn't your field. You're a doctor; you're a lawyer; don't tell me how to

run a school.” Since that time, I’ve grown professionally and I now develop strong collaborative partnerships with parents.

He explains that parents want to provide support for the school, and their ideas can be implemented, as long as they don’t detract from the school mission. At this point, his leadership style is so collaborative that he is wrestling with the question of whether he has given too much power to the people. He provided two examples of this, one that is working and one that is not. The first is a positive instance of parent empowerment. A parent was concerned about low audience attendance at basketball games, so she took the initiative and worked through the principal to create a spirit club that is funded and supported through the Parent Teacher Organization. Funds were used to purchase a mascot costume and students are excited about naming the mascot and seeing it at games this year. This level of initiative is not unusual at Principal F’s school.

The collaboration that concerns him revolves around teacher empowerment in the hiring process. Following a thorough screening process, teacher teams meet with finalists for teaching positions. Their input on final decisions is strictly advisory, however a dilemma occurs when the teacher team and the principal are not in agreement. The principal can certainly hire the candidate that he believes to be the best choice, but then the teachers could sabotage that decision because they are the ones who will work with and mentor the new teacher. He explains, “ If we truly empower the team, we find that they choose to hire people who are like them, who fit in with them. That means we’re perpetuating the female Caucasian in most cases.”

Principal F is now refining his position on collaboration to:

You get to come in with ideas. You don’t get to change the mission. Ideas can come from anywhere, but not decisions. There’s a time and place where I need to lead in a top down manner. Sometimes I need to make a decision and move forward, but I think that being a quality principal means working with people, listening to lots of people.

Participants are reflective, corrective, and evolving.

I reflect. That's what I do. For example, I think about the way I communicate with parents. Am I communicating in a way they want? How do I find out? What is their experience? I want to reach out to parents regarding their needs. I am always reflecting on our practices to make sure that we're doing the best we can for families. (Principal E)

The protocol of this study did nothing less than require participants to reflect on their attitudes, purposes, and practice regarding parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle level. Yet, I did not anticipate that participants would end up reflecting on their reflection as a professional practice. After several principals initiated discussion in this direction, I added questions about professional reflection in the final round of interviews.

Initially, thoughts about reflection emerged as participants openly shared their willingness, even comfort, about being flawed. Discussion about reflection progressed from a focus on being self-critical, in an almost personal rather than professional way, to being a role model for how to make mistakes, own them, and move forward. From there, participants began to describe the corrective outcomes of being reflective, thereby framing it as a growth model. After all of this meta-reflective thought, I focused participants on the role that their professional reflection has played on the evolution of their transition process in the service of families.

The initial unsolicited forays into self-criticism sounded like this: "I'm getting better at this. I used to be awful," and "I came in thinking things were black or white," or the plainly honest, "I was pretty cocky coming in." From there, principals began to present themselves as models for mistake making: "Even when they think I'm wrong, we move forward. And sometimes I *am* wrong, and sometimes I'm right, but we all collaborate and move forward." Another principal explained how to model failure in this way, "I'm not perfect. I make tons of

mistakes. I think I model how to make a mistake and come back from that mistake. I say, ‘Okay we can learn from that and move on.’ Am I perfect? Absolutely not.”

Principal B does not mind being wrong. She does not mind being questioned about anything. She does not mind that people have varying ideas. But, she gets very upset if someone questions her moral integrity. She says,

I’m wrong sometimes. I’m okay with that. And we move on. I’m not so stuck on having to be right all the time that I can’t just take a back pedal and say, “You know what, I didn’t think of it that way.” I’m willing to admit when I’m wrong and not take it personally, unless I’m being questioned professionally and ethically.

Reflection as a growth model.

Even if my message is wrong, it’s consistent. I use the same language with all stakeholders. So my mistakes can be public. When I make a mistake, I model what I want to see them do. I admit my error and look for ways to improve. I address things that were handled poorly and use them to model growth. (Principal C)

Principal B believes that it is important to step back each day and actually think about what she is doing in her role as principal. Principal F is currently reflecting on his professional growth in the area of parent involvement. He explains that he is thinking now about “those parents I’m not reaching. The question is, are they not coming out because they’re busy, because they’re not interested, or is it because there’s a barrier or some sort, like language or economics?” In a similar vein, Principal A is sharing his concern with colleagues about a chronically truant student. He seeks a solution by sharing, “What I’m doing is obviously not working with this kid. What else is there that I can do?” And Principal D gets personal, “I had to learn the hard way not to try to be the smartest person in the room. There’s a humility component that I really had to work on.”

At the beginning of this school year, Principal C expressed the human condition to parents in a welcome back letter containing this excerpt:

The staff at C Middle School is a highly motivated and dedicated group of educational professionals, but we are also human. We will make mistakes in the things we say and the things we do. Many things we do will be different from your idea of correct, but I can assure you our methods and deliveries are always with the best of intentions for student growth and learning. When this occurs reach out to us so we know of your concern and start the conversation towards correction.

He reports that parents expressed appreciation for this positive, solution-seeking approach.

According to Principal C, if you are not constantly critical of your practices or policies, things can very quickly become out of date or not as effective as you wish them to be.

Reflections on the evolution of the transition process. “Oh how I’ve changed in terms of the parent” (Principal F).

Principal F’s understanding of the transition process began when he was the assistant principal at the same school where he is now principal. He viewed the *Fifth Grade Step-up Night* as a dog and pony show. The principal spoke briefly and the teachers smiled and waved. Then the parents went home. He understood,

There was no opportunity for them to get to know us or to begin to learn about middle school. Their anxiety increased because so much was still unknown, and these were people who usually have all of the information and know what’s going on.

Also, as assistant principal, he was responsible for student schedules. The transition time frame did not allow for optimal accuracy with scheduling. When he became principal of the school, he immediately made much needed changes like adjusting the transition timeline to allow for early distribution of schedules, so that corrections could be made before the first day of school. He has continued to make changes to serve the needs of both students and their parents. The transition period is now in a good place and he thinks that evolution was a result of his being a reflective leader.

When Principal A joined his school less than 3 years ago, the transition process was compressed into one single event. He listened to parent and teacher concerns and assumed the

responsibility of being proactive in getting the appropriate information to students and their parents and helping people feel comfortable during the transition. Just over 2 years into his leadership, the transition has already evolved into a process designed to help parents and students develop relationships with the school and their peers. He made sure that staff became a part of that process. The transition period gets better each year because of his reflection that leads to action. He thinks, “How can open house better serve people’s needs? What were people confused about?” He plans for the coming year while ideas are fresh in his mind. Principal A explains the cycle of ongoing change through the concept of vision: “When you move forward, you’ve moved into your current vision, so *that* vision must change. Now you have to ask what will come next and so revise the vision.”

When Principal B began in her current assignment she did not have any middle school experience, so she followed the transition period, just as it had been established by her predecessor. It was not long before her middle school teachers and the principal in the fourth/fifth grade school conveyed needs about the transition process that they heard from parents. The impetus for change came from all directions. She listened to the concerns and revamped the transition process. Principal B expressed the need to adjust the process in an ongoing manner in order to adapt to the changing nature of the community.

Principal C attributes the evolution of his school’s transition period to his growing professional maturity. At the beginning of his tenure he just wanted to come in each day and do the job well. There were so many things that needed to get done in a day, so reflection was a luxury at the beginning of his learning curve. There came a point in his practice that he became aware and reflective of the whole of what he needed to do. In his words,

The further along you get and the more experiences you have, the more mature you get as a professional and you start to recognize that a proactive approach in developing relationships means the world to the successes that you'll have.

For Principal C, parent transitions and parent education are processes that are constantly ongoing, well beyond the formal transition period.

Principal E's evolution regarding parent transitions from elementary to middle level began when he was an assistant principal in another district. He learned a lot as an assistant principal and brought that experience with him everywhere he has worked since. Along the way he has "stolen good ideas" from other administrators. He never stops thinking about what is good for students and parents. Over the years he has learned that it is best to minimize what feels like an ordeal to parents and students by breaking it into bits and providing multiple opportunities for them to gain experience and comfort. That is how the idea originated for this year's new practice of allowing students and parents to get settled in the building during August visits.

Why: Participants' purposes for building parent-school partnerships. As a component of my conceptual framework, democratic organization was the starting point of several questions in my interview protocol, intended as a means to begin the conversation about the state of parent-school partnerships in the school. This often proved to be a difficult topic, as few schools anywhere are structured as purely democratic, particularly with regard to parent involvement. Quite a bit of participant thinking on the topic of democratic organization was reported in the previous section about collaborative leadership styles. The conflation of these two topics led to many discussions about directive versus collaborative leadership and the need for those styles to co-exist. Participants were in agreement that there were components of democratic organizations in their schools. The continuum ranged from the principal listening to parents to the principal engaging parents in decision-making, however limited. Every participant discussed the importance of hearing parents' voices and two-way communication. Several principals

stressed the importance of understanding what parents want so that the school can best represent their values and needs. As with other practices of participants, having a democratic organization was often expressed as a means to an end (student achievement and academic growth).

With specific regard to the period of transition from elementary to middle level, participants expressed purposes for building parent-school partnerships that echoed the needs discussed in the literature review, particularly with regard to barriers to parent-school partnerships at middle level. Participants often cited the goal of making parents and students feel welcome and wanted at their new school, as well as assuaging anxiety and getting off to a good start. Some participants expressed the need to engage parents in different ways from the elementary schools.

Democracy in practice.

We serve a community. So for me, democracy is really about how we create a climate in a school where not only are parents' voices valued, but we take action steps to make sure that the school is represented in the way they want it to be.

We don't vote, so it's not representative in that way, but we have a shared collaborative culture. We work hard to gather information, hear voices. This is a work in progress, but it's happening. We want our communication with parents to be two-way—symmetrical. I believe in service leadership. This is their school, and this is their community. It's incumbent upon me to educate parents about what we're doing and get feedback in that process. (Principal D)

"I don't know if I necessarily like the word democratic," states Principal A. As will be seen, this opinion represents much of the thinking here. Participants did talk about their democratic processes, but they were often really talking about how they communicate or collaborate, certainly aspects of democracy. According to Principal A, parents do not have a formal role in decision-making, but they do influence his decisions. He leads the decision-making process and is responsive to parents. People have a voice that he can "listen to or not listen to." Principal A convenes monthly parent meetings that are open forums where they can

share their thoughts about anything school related. All parents are invited, but in Principal A's words, "Turnout is awful. We always get the same 10 parents, even though we have tried to improve attendance by offering incentives like gift cards." He believes that hearing from parents is important and he is proactive in his efforts to reach out to them.

Principal B works to infuse democracy into her school organization for the purpose of establishing trust. She believes, "Parents need to be heard in order for them to trust you. They have to believe in your goals for their children and know that they're welcome." Her open door policy ensures that many parents interact with her, but she aims to be more inclusive of parents who do not frequent the school by setting up a Parent-Principal Council this year. She will work to establish a group that it is not elitist, citing the same concern of Principal A: a small pool of involved parents to the exclusion of many others. She also shares Principal A's sentiments about the role of parents in decision-making:

Parents may identify concerns to be addressed, but they are not going to make policy. Getting different points of view from parents can sometimes help us restructure policy. I think it's important that parents feel they have a say, but not control over how we do things. (Principal B)

Principal C has a parent advisory committee that has also seen decreased participation in the last couple of years. Selection for that committee was done randomly. Interested parents signed up during registration, then 20 names were drawn. Of those 20 "interested" people, typically four would show up at meetings. Last year he hosted only one meeting due to low attendance. This apparent lack of interest would concern him more, but he thinks it is possible that parents are just happy with what is going on in the school at this time. People tend to come out more often when they have concerns. His thoughts on democracy in the school echo that of other participants:

When you're in a position of leadership, you need to make sure that your stakeholders understand the processes, procedures, and rationale. The democratic process allows for

that to happen. That does not mean that you're going to take a vote and majority rules. There are times that the leader has to make decisions based on privileged information or information that not everyone can comprehend. That said, if rationale is shared as to why you're making choices, people may or may not agree, but hopefully they will be able to move forward.

"My job is to bring people together and give them an opportunity to have a say, to find out where we are at, and then help guide the school in that direction," according to Principal E. He explains that decisions are not made because parents tell him what to do, but are made with the input of the parents. It is important for him to know if they view what he is doing as right. This information is gathered both formally and informally. Principal E espouses a representative aspect to a democratic organization,

In a school setting, we're guests in this community. Our job is to take our commodity, our kids, who are the prize of the community, and provide them with an opportunity to be as successful as they can to grow academically, physically, socially, and emotionally. But that cannot be just a one-sided event. It needs to be in partnership with the community and the parents' beliefs. We need to understand their beliefs because we are representatives of the community in what we do and how we go about doing things. We need to know what the expectations of the community are.

Also concerned about representation of parents, Principal F explains,

There's probably a pocket of parents that we don't see. I want to get it to 100%. I don't think our job is complete if a segment of the population is not represented. Even if they're choosing to opt out, I'm missing out on their feedback. Their voice is missing.

There is not a leadership council that involves parents, teachers, students, and the principal at School F. Principal F does not want to create one just because he has read that it is best practice and something one is supposed to do. He feels that his parents already have many opportunities to provide input and contribute to the decision-making process.

Desired outcomes for the parent transition.

The child is growing, changing so rapidly, and if they don't have a clean, easy, smooth, safe, comfortable transition, you may lose that child. Parents are an integral part of that process. That pushes the transition process right up into a top priority. (Principal E)

Participants named numerous desired outcomes of parent-school partnerships during the transition period for the benefit of both parent and school. These outcomes for the transition activities outlined in the individual case study sections at the beginning of this chapter are all listed here in no particular order. Following this list is reporting about two brief sections about subtle themes related to these outcomes, both of which emerged in the data analysis.

- To gain the trust of parents by demonstrating that their voices will be heard and their children cared for,
- To familiarize parents with school routines, including forms of communication,
- To familiarize parents with school expectations,
- To share information with the school about special needs of children,
- To reduce or eliminate parental fear and anxiety about the transition,
- To educate parents about the unique growth stage of early adolescence and the changing needs of their child,
- To educate parents about how to best support their child at middle level,
- To educate parents about appropriate ways to be involved at the middle school (different for each school),
- To make a positive first impression because there will not be a second chance.

First-time parents. Most participants distinguished between first time middle school parents and parents who were already familiar with the school because of relationships they have established through their older children. Participants described the special care they take with first time parents. It is not unusual for the parent of a first child entering middle school to exhibit greater anxiety and more concerns than the experienced parent. First time parents tend to have many questions, and all of those individual conversations with the principal and staff take time. Fear of the unknown can be a barrier for first time parents and children. Several principals did

note that each child in a family has different needs, so even experienced parents who enter with a second or third child with special needs will require a more individualized transition.

The effect of parents on the transition.

The way parents impact the transition process is an indication of how the school is involving them in the process. If the school is keeping them informed and involving them, the parents will be a positive influence on the child who's transitioning. So while that anxiety piece is a potential negative, it is important to turn it into a positive during the transition process. (Principal E)

Participants frequently expressed their concern that parents tend to have a negative impact on their child's transition to middle school. This was an overwhelming sentiment and reducing the effect of parental anxiety and negative impact was often stated as an important outcome for the transition period. Principal A's sense of the parent-child dynamic is,

Transitions are inherently either neutral or scary. You usually don't have a parent who's very excited, unless it's a parent of an athlete and their kid has a new opportunity to be on a sports team. I think the parent and child feed off one another. If the parent's nervous, the kid gets nervous. If the kid comes home excited, the parent gets excited. They're an emotional entity that feeds off one another.

According to Principal B, one of the challenges of middle school is that parents struggle with the fact that their "baby" is growing up. At the same time, the child is realizing that he has his own mind and can make decisions without consulting mom and dad. "And that's just a negative for the parents. It's just an emotional negative," she offers in explanation for why the transition period can be a difficult time for parents, thus increasing the potential that the child's transition may be negatively impacted.

Principal C states,

Parents are more nervous than their children. They typically don't handle transitions as well as their children do. They can be very concerned about routine things, such as pick up and drop off, lunch, and locker room procedures. Kids adapt more easily. Once they are in the building, they are so busy with everything that is new. Students feed off their parents' stress when they least need it. But parents also affect the transition period positively when they ask questions and express themselves. When parents have a positive attitude and ask good questions, their children feel more comfortable and independent.

Principal F's transition program actively involves large numbers of parent volunteers. These parents actively work to connect parents to one another and to help them feel comfortable. He notes that learning about the school from parents of older children is reassuring and goes a long way toward helping parents make a positive transition to middle level.

How: Participants' parent-school partnership practices, including transition.

Participants' attitudes and beliefs shape *who* they are as school leaders and this affects their relationships with parents. Their motivations and goals influence their purposes for building parent-school partnerships. This final theme explores the *how* of parent-school partnerships at the time of transition. Through this theme, participants' practices are described with regard to parent-school partnerships, in general, and particularly during the time of transition from elementary to middle school. The important topic of communication, a key component of my conceptual framework based on the literature, will be discussed with regard to parent partnerships. Barriers to partnerships will be reported from the participants' points of view along with their remedies, which revolve around principal modeling, teaching, and coaching.

Communication. Over the course of three interviews, participants in this study spoke more about communication than any other topic. As communication was represented through the *Management of Meaning* component of my conceptual framework, there were direct interview questions on the topic. Participants' responses were often meandering, nuanced and emotionally charged. Communication seems to connect to every other aspect of the principalship. Participants described themselves as the hub of an ongoing stream of communication coming and going in all directions. As Principal A states, "Communication is the biggest part of the job." According to Principal F, "As a leader, I manage, coordinate, shape ideas. Communication is huge."

Managing meaning can be a tricky endeavor. Principal D explains that whenever one communicates, there are opportunities for misunderstanding:

I'm probably overly transparent, because sometimes when things go out with what I think is a high level of understanding, they get morphed. Parents may go up the ladder of inference, considering what they think is going to happen, instead of what is being said. They then talk to teachers and possibly get a different story. It's hard to manage perspectives.

The nested structure of my conceptual framework is useful here in understanding how communication impacts parent-school partnerships at the time of transition. The principal's job is massive and complex. It is important to understand that my conceptual framework covers only those aspects of the principal's responsibilities that are related to my literature review. Of course, there are countless other major responsibilities beyond that of *Principal as Community Builder*, advocate for parent-school partnerships and transitions to middle level.

How does one delimit the discussion of communication for the purpose of this study when communication touches every part of a principal's work? Volumes could be written about the principalship with regard to communication, and that sort of broad exploration has no place here. The types of communication explored in this study strictly revolve around how the principal fosters exemplary parent-school partnerships at the time of transition. In the final analysis, while it *is* possible to delimit the broad topic of communication down to the level of parent-school partnerships, it is tricky to break it down all the way to the period of transition.

Through data analysis, themes emerged within the broad topic of communication as it relates to parent-school partnerships. They follow, along with brief descriptions, as needed. Those themes include: purposes of communication, ways that principals communicate, and forms of communication they use. Everything that is reported here is strictly in relation to parent-school partnerships and not the comprehensively broad topic of communication in schools. It all also relates fully to partnerships in transition. In other words, participants' communication

purposes and practices regarding parent relationships completely overlap the subset of parent relationship in transition, with just two exceptions:

- Communication with parents of fifth grade students and their children is done with a soft, caring touch. Participants often discussed the concept of gradual release of responsibility, meaning that as students grow, they assume more responsibility. So too, the relationship between the student and the school begins to grow up, and this is mirrored by the parent. So, while a conversation with the parent of an eighth grade student will still be transparent, consistent, and proactive, it will be caring in a very different manner than a conversation with the parent of a fifth or sixth grade student. Some of the purposes that follow, like establishing trust, demonstrating caring, and making a first impression can still apply in ways to the parent of an eighth grade student. Yet those purposes are more closely aligned with the period of transition from elementary to middle level.
- The other exception is due to the advent of electronic communication. Schools have greatly reduced the amount of paper they use in favor of other media. This is especially true with regard to information that is sent from school to home, which is almost exclusively done via email, websites, and other electronic modes listed here. It is rare for a family to receive a letter from the school via U.S. mail. Transition from elementary to middle seems to be the happy exception. Several participants reported mailing invitations to transition activities directly to parents' homes. The partial reason for this is that electronic distribution systems are often not shared among schools, therefore the middle school may not have electronic access to fifth grade families. The emotionally affective reason is that principals view the transition as a meaningful time in the lives of families, and receiving a letter in the mail makes it feel as special as it is.

Just as *trust* was the key word in the reporting of the importance of relationships, there is a word that was used with great frequency by participants when discussing communication:

Listen. According to these participants, there is nothing more important in interactions among people than actively listening—and hearing, as well. Communication can be either two-way or one-way. The purpose of the communication guides the type. For purposes of transition to middle school, participants note that they engage in two-way communication with parents as often as possible. In this way, they can personally address questions and concerns. One more aspect of communication with regard to parent-school partnerships, and not specific to the transition period, was raised by several participants. That is, for principals who live in the towns

in which they work, especially the small towns, communication is a 24/7 part of their lives. They are quick to point out that that is not a bad thing; it's just their reality.

Expressed purposes of communication in the service of parent-school partnerships.

Participants stated the following purposes for communication in response to interview questions that were specific to parent-school partnerships, particularly at the time of transition from elementary to middle level. This compilation represents all participants, who were in full agreement, although they answered individually.

As discussed in the introduction to this section, it is important to note that these purposes seem quite general and are, in fact, not exclusive to the transition period or to the middle school organization. Yet, the participants communicated these reasons with parent-school partnership during the transition in mind, therefore their inclusion here is meaningful. This caveat applies to subsequent lists in this section, as well. They are listed in no particular order and require no further explanation.

- To establish trust.
- To correct misconceptions or reeducate parents.
- To demonstrate fairness.
- To demonstrate responsiveness.
- To establish rapport.
- To make a first impression.
- To demonstrate caring.
- To inform parents about school events or procedures, including how to reach school personnel.

Ways that participants communicate in service of parent-school partnerships, in general.

Principal practices are listed here. Each is followed by an illustrative quotation from a

participant, with the exception of the first in the list, which was discussed in the introduction to this section. Each of these practices was named by at least two participants, with the exception of the first one, which was named by all. These practices are listed in no particular order. It is worth noting here that these are practices that principals report not only as part of what they do, but also as what they model for teachers and/or parents. The practice of modeling was described by participants throughout the course of this study and is discussed later in this chapter.

- Active listening and hearing.
- Single point of contact:

Sixth grade is my only grade level that has a designated contact person, a teacher within the sixth grade, who is responsible for contacting parents on a weekly basis. This guarantees regular telephone interaction with sixth grade parents while streamlining the process, so that they are not overwhelmed by phone calls from too many people.
(Principal A)

- Engaging in difficult conversations, a skill of civility:

Sometimes parents will get frustrated. That's fine. Sometimes they don't like me. That's fine, too. I don't think you can change that. I have to realize that people have things going on in their lives that may contribute to their frustration with the school at the moment. Handling difficult conversations is a skill that I developed over time and with the experience of previous positions I've held. It's important to try to communicate with parents' sensibilities and be genuine with them. You don't want to meet nastiness with nastiness. But you do want to stand up for what's right. (Principal B)

- Consistency and transparency, delivering the same message in the same way for all:

If parents have not been paying attention to all the communication we put out, I have to go back and put Band-Aids on and find a way to fix the lack of knowledge of the parent. Sometimes I have to reeducate the parent and show them where the information was given. This must be done in such a way that maintains the dignity of the parent. I'm incredibly consistent. I believe that if we deliver communication clearly and consistently, most miscommunication can be avoided. Most problems occur when the communication is one-way. (Principal C)

- Two-way communication, feedback loops:

Effective communication must not only be two-way, it must be symmetrical. I cut my teeth around flattening the organization. It can't be where I'm going to give you

communication *when I want to*, but I'll only hear back from you *when I want to*. There must be an open feedback loop for all stakeholders. (Principal D)

- Proactivity:

I keep the information flowing for parents, but I don't always know which pieces are important to them and which are not. I work to be proactive in my communication, but I need to be aware of what parents want to know. Sometimes I'll hear something from a parent and I'll pass the information on to all parents. It's a two-way street and I'm in the midst of it all, staying on top of things. (Principal E)

- Know and respect your audience:

Most of my parents are highly intelligent, educated people and I need to respect their time. I tell them, "I'm going to send you school information via email one time and I'm going to expect that you've read it. If I send you an email, it's one that I believe is important and I hope you read it. I'm not going to spam you." Redundant communication makes people feel less engaged. I also have to be sensitive about levels of parent education in my school. While I don't want to talk down to my professional parents, I also want to be sure that my message is clear for my less educated parents. (Principal F)

Forms of communication used by participants in service of parent-school partnerships.

Principals have a wide variety of communication options available to them. Many participants noted that it is important to read situations accurately in order determine the best form of communication for each particular purpose. Not all participants named all of these options. Some of these forms of communication were discussed earlier in this chapter with regard to practices of particular participants. Forms of communication are grouped here as non-electronic and electronic. Electronic forms can be *passive* (e.g., websites that parents may choose to visit to find information) or *pushed* (e-blasts that are sent at the push of a button to an all-school distribution list or to specific groups of parents). A brief description is provided for forms that are not self-explanatory.

Non-electronic:

- In person meetings at the school.
- Home visits.

- Telephone calls to or from the school.
- Telephone calls to or from a personal or district-supplied cell phone:

Districts sometimes provide cell phones to principals for the purpose of accessibility. Sharing a personal cell phone number with parents is an individual choice of some participants.

- U.S. mail:

While this form is typically only used important mailings (i.e., legal purposes), several participants reported sending letters about the transition process home through the mail. In part this is because during the time of transition, middle schools have typically not yet gained access to electronic distribution lists of fifth grade families. Another reason is that participants felt that it would be special for fifth graders to receive mail from the middle school.

- Flyers or documents sent home with students, often known as *backpack items*:

This form of communication has fallen out of favor with participants because middle school students are notorious for not bringing papers home, and it is not a green practice. If it becomes necessary to send something home with a child, some of the participants will email the parents to alert them so they can look for it.

- The physical state of the middle school:

One principal struggles with a poorly maintained building that is not inviting for parents. He sees this as a form of communication that does not represent the school's values.

Electronic (pushed):

- Email:

Participants reported that this was the most frequent form of communication due to ease of use. Principals can send emails to any combination of stakeholders through the creation of specific distribution groups (e.g., bus routes or homerooms). A drawback is that it can only communicate one way at a time.

- School notification systems (e.g., *SchoolReach*):

These systems are typically used for emergencies by blasting a recorded message to parents' telephones.

Electronic (passive):

- School announcements:

These are typically broadcast over the school intercom, but are often also available to parents on the school website or through the student information system.

- School website:

This can be a comprehensive repository of information, but parents will need to learn to successfully navigate it.

- Student information systems:

Parents and students can log on to see live grade reports and other information.

- Homework sites (e.g., *Haiku Learning*):

These are cloud-based classroom pages that teachers can create for students and parents to access homework on a computer anywhere. Videos and other tools can be embedded on these pages so that actual lessons may be viewed.

- Social media:

Two participants are blogging, one is on Twitter, and most have some presence on Facebook, often through the parent organization. One participant reported that when polled, his parents informed him that they were not interested in communicating via Twitter.

Participants' roles as teachers and models in service of overcoming barriers to parent-school partnerships.

Principal A: "I teach teachers; I teach kids; I teach parents; I teach the community."

Principal B: "Regarding the principal's role in partnerships, the most important thing I do is model those relationships with the parents and with the teachers."

Principal C: "The biggest thing I can do is encourage parents to be involved, encourage them to value education, and reinforce that they're a vital part of that process."

Principal E: "Modeling actually works with staff . . . when they get a tough email from a parent, I want to see it right away. I coach them through it."

Throughout this study, participants shared their concerns about numerous obstacles to parent-school partnerships. Each of the barriers that follows was named by at least two of the participants. It was as though they were reciting the *Barriers to Parent-School Partnerships at Middle Level* section from chapter 2, identifying all of the barriers named in the literature review

and more. The barriers that participants identified are listed here, along with the responsive practices that some participants have found effective. These barriers are separated into categories according to the responsive practices engaged in by participants: Teaching and modeling for parents, teaching and modeling for teachers and staff, and responsive practices of participants with regard to other barriers.

The barriers discussed here certainly apply at middle level outside the transition period, however all participants were adamant about the importance of connecting with parents and addressing these concerns during the transition period. Often, participants in this study went to great lengths to ameliorate, or not eliminate, the barriers that fall within their influence prior to the start of school. The extensive parent communication and activities established by participants for the transition process were designed, in part, to address barriers to parent-school partnerships proactively, most often with a focus on increasing parental trust and reducing parental anxiety with the desired outcome being the best possible start in middle school for the child. Responsive practices by participants for parents continued beyond the transition period for as long as needed.

Participants report modeling attitudes and behaviors for teachers in an ongoing manner throughout the school year, with special attention paid to the transition period. The importance of building relationships and providing early and effective communication is reinforced with teachers in a variety of ways.

Participants reported positive results in reducing barriers and establishing relationships when, through the transition process, they were able to lead staff in creating a welcoming environment for parents; when various forms of orientation provided information, procedures, and parent education about early adolescent development; and when modes of communication were caring, transparent, appropriate for the situation, and easy to access. Every participant

reported at least one way in which he or she structures the transition period in a more inviting, flexible, and caring manner than is the norm for older students and their parents.

Examples of participants' responsive practices for overcoming barriers are provided here under the bulleted barriers, which are described as needed:

Teaching and modeling of attitudes and behaviors for parents by principals.

- Parents feel insecure in the school setting, often due to a lack of life skills or reminders of their own negative school experiences.

Participants reported engaging in the responsive practices of creating a transparent environment, opening lines of communication, and offering parent empowerment classes or other parent education. Participants agree that actively pursuing relationships is key. In explaining a program for struggling students that he established in a previous district, Principal D describes the importance of creating a stress free school environment for parents and engaging them on the team:

We looked for safety nets to put in place for each kid and realized that a parent component was missing. We needed to engage the parent to be sure there was a 360-degree touch. Kids in the program had stressors that required external support systems, but we were hotlining [i.e., rejection hotline] parents and that wasn't getting us anywhere. When we hotline a parent, we completely close them down. Then they don't trust us anymore, and we're out of the picture. We began thinking that we needed to support the parents, as well, so we added a peer support component for parents.

- Parents are influenced by previous negative experiences in the school or district.

Participants reported engaging in the responsive practice of directly confronting the parent's concern through caring discussion. There is typically a need in these cases to reeducate the parent by sharing great things about the middle school and welcoming the parent. In one instance, a participant reported working side by side with a teacher who had a negative history with a parent. The principal coached the teacher to initiate communication with the parent, thereby establishing a fresh start.

- Parents feel challenged by the more advanced middle school curricula.

Participants reported engaging in the responsive practice of training parents to support and encourage student autonomy through the development of relationships with teachers. Most middle schools in this study offered opportunities for students to engage in academic support activities before or after school. Many study participants now offer electronic cloud-based homework sites where students and parents have ready access to homework and even videos of lessons. This can help parents learn along with their children and understand what is happening in the classroom.

- Parents are not ready to accept the growing autonomy of their early adolescent or the reality that their child may no longer want them in the school.

Participants reported engaging in the responsive practices of providing parent education on the topic of early adolescent development and communicating expectations for the gradual release of responsibility leading to student independence. These activities and communications were typically a component of the transition process. Study participants were in agreement that parent involvement at middle level is qualitatively and quantitatively different from that at the elementary level. Principal B suggested “fashioning parent-involvement opportunities at the middle school that do not overwhelm the child.”

- Parents experience anxiety or fear regarding the transition to middle school.

Participants overwhelmingly reported that overcoming parental anxiety was their primary purpose in fostering parent-school partnerships during the transition period, during which parents are showered with information, education, and care. Practices for overcoming this barrier have been thoroughly covered in this chapter.

- Parents may choose not to engage with the school due to difficulties with other parents.

Two participants spoke extensively about situations involving cliques among a group of involved parents or an instance of a parent leader who is mean to other parents. These affected participants reported engaging in the responsive practice of instituting ways of randomizing and/or balancing parent representation in groups or committees. This may involve the principal reaching out to parents who fall between the cracks. The principal of the difficult parent leader engages in direct conversations with her to help her understand her effect on other parents and her undermining of the school mission. These are difficult conversations. These participants noted that building capacity among parents was a priority.

Teaching and modeling of attitudes and behaviors for teachers and staff by principals.

- The school community, in general, is not welcoming or parent-friendly.

According to Principal A, “The attitude the staff gives off is important. It’s the main way parents perceive the school.” Participants reported engaging in the responsive practice of communicating parent-school partnership expectations to teachers and staff, typically at meetings before the start of the school year. Principals reinforce these expectations for positive attitude and professional behavior through principal modeling. If necessary, teacher monitoring and evaluation processes can come into play to resolve this issue. In one case, the principal became aware that teachers were not positively representing the school at Open House. This principal now works to standardize the teacher’s role at Open House by providing talking points that include in-bounds and out-of-bounds topics. This is an example of the importance of first impressions in establishing relationships. The issue of the condition of the school facility as an indicator of how welcoming a school feels was also discussed in the section on communication.

- Communication to or from the school is ineffective.

This barrier has been discussed thoroughly in the previous section on communication. Briefly, participants provide orientation for parents during the transition period on the many modes of communication that take place in the school and the purposes for each. The transition period is also when the participants set expectations for the tone of communication, which is ideally caring, positive, and productive. This barrier extends into the next point.

- Teachers feel intimidated by parents, thus affecting their use of communication and their ability to establish positive relationships.

All participants identified this barrier as being of the utmost concern. Their unanimity regarding the problem and remedy was striking. Words used to describe the feelings of teachers included: inadequate, vulnerable, fearful, unsafe, and defensive. Participants described parents as having the potential to be bold, confrontational, and intimidating, particularly those who are well educated. Adding to this concern is today's technology that is more impersonal than most people realize, potentially creating a false sense of anonymity. Parents often make negative comments in emails that they would not say in person. As was discussed in the previous section on communication, the email format is limited in its ability to accurately communicate tone. All participants were in agreement that the remedy to this barrier to parent-school partnerships is simply for teachers to pick up the phone—early and often. Principal E paints the picture:

Some teachers feel: *Let me do my job. Leave me alone.* They fear the fact that that we have parents who are well educated and confrontational, intimidating at times. There is fear on the part of the teachers to pick up the phone because there may be a confrontation or a difficult conversation that they may not be able to manage. So they push really hard for email. My continuous push is for them to pick up the phone.

Participants had various ways of establishing expectations for parent-teacher communication. Some did not issue formalized direction, but established expectations as a guiding force. Others imposed strict monitoring such as the use of phone logs, a requirement for calling each parent at least once before the end of the first quarter for either positive or corrective

conversations, and teacher evaluation instruments. Other responsive practices reported by principals include various means of showing support for the staff, efforts to keep teachers happy, and the sharing of tools for effective communication. Sometimes teachers feel that principals need to choose sides, but one participant wisely pointed out that there are no sides; it is possible to support both teacher and parent simultaneously. The responsive practice cited by participants as the most effective was modeling and coaching by the principal. Several participants told moving stories about teachers who had been frozen with fear because of emails they had received from parents or communication they needed to send. In each case, the principal reassured the teacher that they would do the task together with the principal sitting right next to the teacher as he or she made the dreaded phone call. Through effective modeling and coaching by principals, teachers can overcome their fear of establishing relationships with parents, avoiding the breakdown in parent-school partnerships. Participants note that the value of phone calls over emails, when appropriate, needs to be communicated during the transition process. On a side note, best practice can be sabotaged by parents who insist on communicating solely via email for the legal purpose of documentation and accountability.

- Office staff members are not welcoming or parent-friendly.

In most cases, participants raved about their office personnel as being wonderful first points of contact for parents, however two participants reported that members of their office staff were barriers to parent-school partnerships. In fact, the negative attitudes of office staff may undermine the transition process. These two participants described employees who exhibit a lack of friendliness when dealing with parents, treat families inequitably, and exhibit openly negative attitudes that, at times, include anger. These participants report that they not only model caring attitudes and behaviors for these employees, but that they engage in direct conversations with

them about the philosophy of the school, expectations for attitudes and behaviors, and explanations of the effect of their behavior on the community. In both cases, there are other office employees who act as buffers for the offending staff member. These principals also make themselves visible and available when parents and other guests are present in the office.

Responsive practices of participants with regard to other barriers. Participants identified additional barriers that are largely beyond the purview of the school. Principals view it as their responsibility to increase the school's awareness of family stressors through the use of relationship building and communication. All of these barriers can create inequities in the school setting. Some participants shared ways that they or the school and larger community have provided support.

- Family stressors: These barriers may take the form of parents working multiple jobs or longer hours due to financial strain and the fact that the child can now fend for himself after school, job loss, non-traditional family structures, and divorce. As a result of these, parents may not have access to computers or cell phones, making school-home communication a challenge.

Participants reported engaging in the responsive practice of providing funds or other assistance, often confidentially, for clothing and school activities. The sources of assistance can be parent groups, church groups, or the principal. Social workers and administrators may be involved in facilitating assistance between donor and recipient. Each participant has identified parents who do not have computers at home and procedures have been put in place to send paper communication home with students.

- Geography: Excessive distance from home to school is a barrier due to lack of transportation. Parents may struggle to attend school events. Home visits by the school may be difficult, if not impossible.

Participants reported engaging in the responsive practices of helping parents connect with each other for the purpose of carpooling and providing money for transportation.

- Cultural barriers: Transition to middle school can be a greater challenge for families with cultural norms that differ from the majority in the school or for whom English is not their primary language.

Participants reported engaging in the responsive practice of respectfully providing options for students in the lunchroom and/or locker room. Some participants have arranged for communication to be translated, when possible.

Summary of Findings

This multiple-case study of six middle school principals included participants from six different counties in Illinois covering a varied range of demographics—rural, urban, and suburban. District and school level enrollments varied greatly as did income levels of families in the districts. Principals spanned the ages of 20s to 50s, and their experience as administrators ranged from almost 3 years to more than 20. These diverse participants provided rich, thick descriptions of the attitudes, purposes, and practices of middle school principals for parent-school partnerships at the time of transition from elementary to middle level. While generalization may not result from six case studies, themes emerged, both naturalistically and through the use of a conceptual framework based on the literature review.

Individual case studies were presented in the first part of chapter 4. Each participant was described with regard to *who* they are based on their attitudes and beliefs, *why* they value and support parent-school partnerships (at the time of transition and in general) based on their purposes for promoting such relationships, and *how* they foster parent-school partnerships, specifically at the time of transition, through a detailed, comprehensive timeline of activities. Findings were aggregated in the second part of this chapter under the headings of emergent themes. Principals were described collectively through their views on the importance of parent

relationships, their professional influences and motivations, and their common practice of professional reflection and growth. The motivations of participants were discussed through their views of democracy in practice and a combined list of their desired outcomes for parent-partnerships during the transition period. Finally, the heart of the research question was described through the actions of communication practices and the modeling, teaching, and coaching strategies employed by participants to overcome barriers to parent-school partnerships in transition.

The use of themes illustrated commonalities among participants and also created the opportunity for discussion of semantic differences and approaches tailored to unique localities. The nested structure of my conceptual framework created some overlap of findings for parent-school partnerships, in general, and parent-school partnerships specifically at the time of transition. This was addressed in chapter 4 and will be further discussed in the limitations section of chapter 5. Conclusions, including an aggregated summary of principals' transition practices, along with suggested extensions of this study will also be presented in chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Discussion

Conclusions

This multiple-case study set out to answer one broadly stated question: *How do nominated middle level principals foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle school?* Intended to be a starting point for rich description in a literature gap that does not seem to be a priority for many in education at this time, this study was, in fact, a vehicle for beginning to understand what middle level principals believe, aspire to, and actually do during this unique and vulnerable time in the lives of families.

Six principals were selected from among nominees who were anonymously suggested for this study because of the perception that their leadership practice included exemplary parent-school partnerships. I am grateful to these six unnamed individuals for their generosity of time and spirit in making a commitment to the study of an oft-neglected area in our middle school world—an area that matters deeply to me, and I know now to them, as well.

A conceptual framework positing the *principal as community builder* presiding over a nested structure made up of interrelated aspects of leadership and parent-school partnership practice was the picture I used to inform my research protocol of participant selection, interview questions, and the starting point for themes in the data analysis process.

While findings from a multiple-case study of six middle school principals may not be generalized, naturalistic patterns and themes did, in fact, emerge. Six very different units of study were as individual as could be as personalities, but their dedication to parent-school partnerships and their devotion to fostering caring and optimal transitions for their parents and, by extension,

their students, was a position they shared to the fullest. Their stories and the themes that emerged were described in chapter 4. Here, I will share some thoughts and conclusions about those findings and the research process.

Selection process, participants, and themes. Case studies may be conducted for many purposes. I wished to explore a particular area of expertise at the intersection of three interrelated aspects of education: leadership, middle schools, and parent-school partnerships. My research question and purpose sit right at the point where those literatures meet. I needed to find a participant pool that would produce like cases for this study. I did not seek to compare or contrast cases. I wanted to explore like cases in order to describe what works well when a principal fosters parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle level. Education is a field that is often criticized for all that does not work. I believe that the value in identifying what works well is in the potential for replication and advancement of practice.

While working with the IRB to finalize a selection process that would ensure six quality participants, I was warned that it could be difficult to procure a nominee pool large enough for the purpose of this study unless the selection process was layered. I believe it was my conceptual framework that produced the *quality* and the recommended layered selection protocol that produced the *pool*. The pool was not deep, but the selection process worked. Finding and engaging these six quality units of study validated my conceptual framework and protocol—an early success. But, in the *limitations* section that follows, I explain how my conceptual framework contributed to the data overload of this multiple-case study.

I not only found middle school principals who actively facilitated parent-school partnerships and extended that support into the period of transition from elementary to middle level, nor did I just find six like cases—I found that these participants who were selected for my

study based on an anonymous nomination, a telephone survey, and an oddly designed rubric had so much to tell me about what kind of a principal cares about parents who are crazed with anxiety because their child is moving to middle school. The rubric was probably superfluous. These participants seemed right for the study from the time they gave up 30 to 45 valuable minutes of summer planning to talk to someone they had never met about their enthusiasm for parent-school partnerships. The purpose of this study was not just to understand *how* these middle school principals foster parent-school partnerships during transition, but also to find out *who* these people are—what they believe and what drives them. This aspect of the study is distinctive.

As was detailed in the findings of chapter 4, these are principals who aspire to lead collaborative organizations, but know that it is actually tricky to be democratic-like when there is so much that needs to be done each day. These are principals who love their students without question, and most of them are guided by “doing what’s best for kids,” but they recognize that they often do things because they are defensible or a means to an end. The nature of the job is that all of these statements can be simultaneously true, because everything the principal does is interconnected.

These principals are transparent about their flaws and mistakes. They are proud to model how to own mistakes, recover from them, and grow to ever-greater heights. These units of study are reflective about their professional practice to the point of problem solving through the night about a child who is chronically truant or a parent who needs a lifeline. They give freely—of their time, their money, their wisdom, their hearts, their baked goods—they even give out their private cell phone numbers.

These six participants believe that relationships make schools go round. They know it takes trust to make that happen. And they know how to make trust happen. This is probably so because these principals have had people believe in them long before they were administrators. Some were nurtured by supervisors who recognized their talent. One was raised by a father who was a principal before him. Another is greatly influenced by a controversial public figure. And at least two-thirds of these participants, and I only know this because they brought it up, are driven by a mission to serve God.

These principals know how to get things done, and they know why they want to do things. With regard to parent transitions, they want parents to trust them with the loves of their lives. They want to educate parents on how to best support their children as they grow, and about ways parents can best support the school in the process. They'll take two-way communication over one-way any day, and they want their teachers to just pick up the phone and talk to parents. They want to wave a magic wand to make their parents' anxieties and fears about middle school disappear, but they know that it takes a lot more than that. They partner, delegate, model, teach, and coach in the service of their children and families.

The transition. The detailed case studies reported in chapter 4 describe the attitudes, purposes, and practices of each participant in a way that maintains confidentiality. In those individual case sections, each of them shared the timeline of their transition process from start to finish, and they described all of the activities, whether for parent only, child only, or both. Sometimes transition activities were internal, involving only school personnel. There is no uniformity to their practices, but there are commonalities, patterns, and outliers. In this conclusion, I will briefly put these cases together to paint a picture of exemplary parent-school partnerships.

The typical transition period begins in January of fifth grade and ends in September of sixth grade, although most principals in this study feel that even after formal transition activities are over, the transition process for children continues for several more months. Parents, who tend to be more nervous than their students at the front end, relax shortly after the start of the school year when they see that their children are happy. Most principals spread the activities out in such a way that there is something going on each month during that period. One district has a unique responsibility to provide athletic opportunities for students in the absence of a park district, so that principal actually begins the transition process in September of fifth grade when he meets with fifth grade students about athletic opportunities that the middle school hosts for them. The outlier on the other end of the timeline ends his formal transition activities in October when he engages parents in his *Middle School 101* presentation at the first PTO meeting of the year.

Activities are different at each school, but there is a pattern of sorts. The activities listed here happen in most places. They are called by different names, and they are not necessarily in the same order or during the same month:

- The middle school principal visits fifth grade classes at the elementary school to welcome them and provide a middle school overview for students.
- Parents of fifth grade students come to the middle school for a welcome presentation by the principal and other staff. Parents tour the school and engage in a question and answer session.
- Fifth grade students visit the middle school for a presentation, tour, and sometimes food. There are often older students who guide the tours or lead panel discussions.
- Several principals shared details about their internal information gathering and placement processes for incoming students, involving parents only with regard to paperwork or meetings about their child's special needs.
- Two of the schools host dances for the fifth grade students.
- One principal builds relationships by getting fit with his almost-sixth graders for 30 days in June.

- There is a hiatus in July for all schools, except where principals work year-round and continue to have individual transition meetings, as needed, with parents and students.
- August is busy for everyone. There are two types of activities that may occur in August. Most schools have a sixth grade orientation just before the start of the school year. This major event is typically for both students and parents. Schedules are distributed and students and parents have the opportunity to walk their schedules and practice using their lockers and the dreaded combination locks. The other August activity is a self-directed time for students and parents to get situated in the school—to find their way around at their leisure, organize their lockers, and take care of loose ends with office staff. Most principals who provide such time report that it is a new practice at their school and that parents love it. The range of time that principals allow for this early access to the building ranges from one half-day to two weeks.
- Some activities are for children only; some are for parents only; some are for both, except in those cases where the children don't want to be seen with their parents. Some activities are for getting organized and learning about the middle school; some are purely for fun in order to eliminate or minimize transition anxiety. Parents get to join the PTA or the PTO or the PTG, or nothing because their school has an informal army of volunteers, but nothing formal. There are lots of tours, lots of presentations by principals, more food than might be expected, and so much anxiety about combination locks.

It was noted in the literature review that one study found an average of 4.5 student activities during the transition period. Parents were not specifically mentioned, nor were principals. Also, a mini meta-analysis of literature produced four recommendations for transition practices, again often not specifically mentioning principals. Overlapping with the findings of this study, these recommendations called for: goal setting and planning by a transition team, visits by elementary students and their parents to the middle school at the end of the last elementary year, visits by elementary students and their parents to the middle school at the start of the middle school year, and two-way communication between parents and school personnel. In contrast, principals in this study reported an average of more than six transition activities for students and/or parents, not including internal information gathering and planning meetings. Parents were not only included in transition activities by study participants, their presence was valued and recognized as key to successful student transitions.

It is important to note that this study is about parent partnerships during transition, yet there is much discussion about children. As I organized the data for reporting, I found that practices and purposes were so interconnected that it was nearly impossible to tease out just what the parents do without also discussing what the students do. As principals told me repeatedly, there is a parent component in everything. The overarching focus in working with parents during the fifth grade year is to ease the parent transition so parents can ease that of their children. Each of these principals valued their parent partnerships and took special care during the transition period to be sure that partnerships were off to a good start.

Discussion

Before discussing the limitations of the study and other topics, I will briefly share my experience with the data collection process, specifically the interviews. The interview process is a technical endeavor these days. I could not have been more pleased with the ease of use and the reliability of my digital audio recorders. I used two at all times in order to ensure that I would not lose data before saving it to my computer and flash drive. The audio quality of the recorders was outstanding, contributing to ease of transcription. Audio files were ultimately uploaded to my University of Illinois Box account where they were encrypted and shared with my advisor and transcriber. I learned to do audio recordings while on Skype with my participants. And without NVivo 10 for Mac, I could never have managed the huge volume of data (over 700 pages of transcriptions).

The interview process was time and travel intensive. Nearly 27 hours of interviewing spanned a two-and-a-half-month period, with all interviews in each round taking place within one and a half weeks of each other. Interviews for each participant were as close to one month

apart as possible. Participants were located throughout Illinois; therefore, I traveled almost 2,000 miles while in the field. Expenses in addition to technology needs (digital audio recorders, NVivo 10 for Mac and NVivo training modules) included transcriptions and hotel rooms.

Limitations. As stated in chapters 1 and 3, the limitations of this study are, in fact, consistent with the limitations of qualitative research in general. Data overload was certainly a significant limitation in terms of time, effort, and resources. The greatest challenge of the entire process was moving from coding to reporting, due to the bulk of data. I was lucky to have a skilled transcriber who transcribed all 18 interviews in a consistent manner. Without that service, the data analysis would have been untenable. I am sure that I made the novice mistake of trying to report too much.

I cannot rule out the possibility of distortions by participants or researcher, a common concern with case study research. Merriam (1998) bears repeating: “The investigator as human instrument is limited by being human—that is, mistakes are made, opportunities are missed, personal biases interfere” (p. 20). I cannot possibly know which mistakes I made that I am unaware of, but I do know that on a number of occasions during member checking, I was grateful to receive corrections from my participants.

To be clear, the findings stated here are solely based on interviews with and corroborating documents provided by the participants themselves. My reporting of participants’ responses and the rich description that has been organized according to participants and themes has not been verified by other sources, short of the anonymous nominations of the selection process. Self-reporting, a key aspect of case study interviews, in general, and this study, in particular, is simultaneously illustrative and limiting, as participant bias is impossible to rule out.

The most interesting limitation for me was that I ended up with so much conflated data. Starting with the interview process, information was conveyed by participants in such a way that was so interconnected. I think that may be because that is actually how the job of principal works in the natural world. Nothing occurs in a vacuum, and everything has to come together as neatly as possible or the job is not getting done. I would be interviewing a participant about activities with parents during transition, and suddenly we would be talking about combination locks, then how the principal may do away with locks all together in the coming year, then how the class sizes are going up or down. As the interviewer, I was keenly aware of when I had to get back on track, but I was also happy to be hearing stories from principals who clearly love their jobs and their people. It was clear to me that principals do not think of anything in isolation. Things got conflated during the interview process, but that was nothing compared to the task of untangling the data into themes. It was not unusual for three or more themes to be mentioned in the same paragraph, so initially the same quotes were being sorted to multiple places in NVivo. It took several re-sortings to get the themes arranged in a way that conveyed meaning and patterns.

After settling on a meaningful organization of the data, I began to realize that a major source of the conflation was the nested structure of my conceptual framework. With transition practices at the very center of everything else, it is no wonder that everything belonged everywhere. If a quotation was in transition practices, it also had to be somewhere in parent-school partnerships, and also somewhere again in the leadership bins. I think that my conceptual framework was right for this study, but having experienced the analysis and reporting processes, I would now know how, in future studies, to construct my themes more effectively from the start of the coding process.

Reflection by participants. I noticed in the first round of interviews that one of the participants was taking notes. I did not understand until the second interview that, as we were talking, he was coming up with ideas for his parent-school partnerships during transition, and he wanted to make note of them before he forgot. I had already included a question about reflection with regard to the interview process in my second round of interviews, but as I got to know my participants better and they became comfortable enough to share their reflections, even about things barely tangential to the study, I realized that there was something going on about conversation stimulating professional reflection. I added more questions about it in my third round of interviews.

This interests me because parent-school partnership, especially considering this study's delimitation to the transition period, is not a hot topic in education today. However, just the act of talking about it seemed to excite and motivate most of the participants. By the end of the study I was hearing that principals were already planning for the next transition, months before they typically start. Some were calendarizing activities with feeder schools much earlier than ever. Several principals told me that they were making changes in their transition processes partly because our conversations had provoked thought, but also because these thoughts had been brewing for quite some time, just not strongly enough to stir them to action. To be sure, there were also principals whose transition processes were right where they wanted them and participation in the study did not stimulate new thinking for them.

It seemed to me that the very action of engaging deeply in a topic about principal practice may stimulate professional growth. This led me to ask a third round question that provoked disturbing conclusions. This topic of collegial discussion and professional development opportunities is featured in the next section.

Opportunities for collegial discussion on the topics of parent-school partnerships and/or transition to middle school. In this time of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), and the Performance Evaluation Reform Act of 2010 (PERA), it seems that there is little time in a principal's work life to talk about parent-school partnerships in general, let alone at the time of transition from elementary to middle level. It is understandable that, considering the required initiatives named here, the topic of this study would not be high on most priority lists. Yet, these study participants expressed the opposite; they reported viewing parent-school partnerships as a high priority because it is foundational for so much else.

The third round question I added was regarding participants' opportunities for discussing this topic with their peers. I thought that if their participation in this study sparked ideas and action, it would be meaningful to introduce topics such as this into professional discourse, whether through consortiums of middle level principals or through formal professional development activities. I asked if there are venues for discussing parent-school partnerships and/or transition practices with their peers. Only one principal reported this being a topic at meetings with colleagues. The others said that it did not show up on agendas, unless someone was having a problem.

If, in fact, there was some benefit in this area for principals who participated in this study, then perhaps there would be even greater benefit if the topics of parent-school partnerships or transition to middle level were to be re-introduced in middle school leadership circles as something worthy of discussion and/or study. I cannot remember the last time I saw a professional development offering about these topics. And if offered, I wonder if people would attend. If the principals I studied thought it was important, what do others think? Are there

implications here for a professional development opportunity or perhaps just for the informal sharing of ideas? Are principals too overwhelmed with required initiatives to give any formalized attention to parent-school partnerships and/or transition practices?

Recommendations for further study. I discussed the nature of the research gap in chapter 1. In the absence of literature on the topic of the middle school principal's role in fostering exemplary parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle level, my only aim was to begin the discussion by describing these six cases. As the study progressed, ideas for future study emerged. One was first stated by one of my participants. As we were talking about elementary to middle level transition, he reminded me that as a middle school principal he transitions students to high school, as well. In fact, that was what he was working on at that time. His suggestion was to study the transition at the other end of the middle school timeline.

I have already noted the need, as expressed by my study participants, for adding the topic of parent-school partnerships in transition to in-service principal professional development or even to the agendas of less formal collegial cohorts. Not to be lost is the potential value of increased and targeted pre-service training on this topic. While university curricula may include topics about parent and community involvement, that information may be organized in a haphazard way. Studies such as this one and related potential studies, described here, may serve to inform programs for pre-service principals and university curricula in the future. For this reason, the potential studies recommended here would best serve future teachers and school administrators by focusing on the specific needs of discrete populations.

An obvious thought about potential future studies is regarding replication. Being a multiple-case study with only six cases, each potential replication would involve new

participants, so the findings would likely be at least somewhat different. In addition, other researchers might view and organize patterns differently. Replication would provide the means for deepening the research base of this often-overlooked topic.

There are many ways to expand upon this study, particularly with regard to varying communities and school populations. This small descriptive study lays the groundwork for future studies of what parent-school partnerships look like across racial, ethnic, geographic, and income groups. While the particular focus of this study is approaches of the middle school principal with regard to exemplary partnerships, future studies might be constructed to compare and contrast approaches of the principal across a range of school and community demographics. Related questions are: Are *exemplary* partnerships responsive to *all* parents? Do parents in varying circumstances require different types of engagement? Also, of potential interest would be the converse of this study. Instead of interviewing principals to ascertain their practices, future researchers might interview parents to determine their views on if and how parent-school partnerships enhance the educational experiences of their children. How do parents describe parent-school partnerships as exemplary? How do they view the principal's role? Further delimitation of this study by demographics or point of view would potentially yield more nuanced findings.

Perhaps most interesting to me would be the opportunity to do a much larger study of random middle school principals. I have stated here that I believe my selection process gleaned six quality participants, but there is no way I can really know what a principal who fosters parent-school partnerships during transition looks like unless I have something to compare him or her with. A larger random study would quite naturally filter participants in terms of quality because exemplary practices would be recognizable when seen in relation to non-exemplary

practices. Of course, larger studies would have significant limitations. Surveys would most likely replace in-depth interviews and the benefits of case study research might be lost in favor of a more qualitative approach.

Whatever the form of further studies, I believe the middle school principal's role in fostering exemplary parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle level is a worthy topic, and I would be interested in seeing the research base about principal practice expand, both in terms of parent-school partnerships and the transition period. Future studies may be so narrow as to describe specific approaches for varying communities, or they may be so broad as to approach the ability to generalize about best practice across geographic, racial/ethnic, or income boundaries. The more targeted the research designs and findings, the greater the potential will be for informing both pre-service preparation and in-service professional development and practice for principals.

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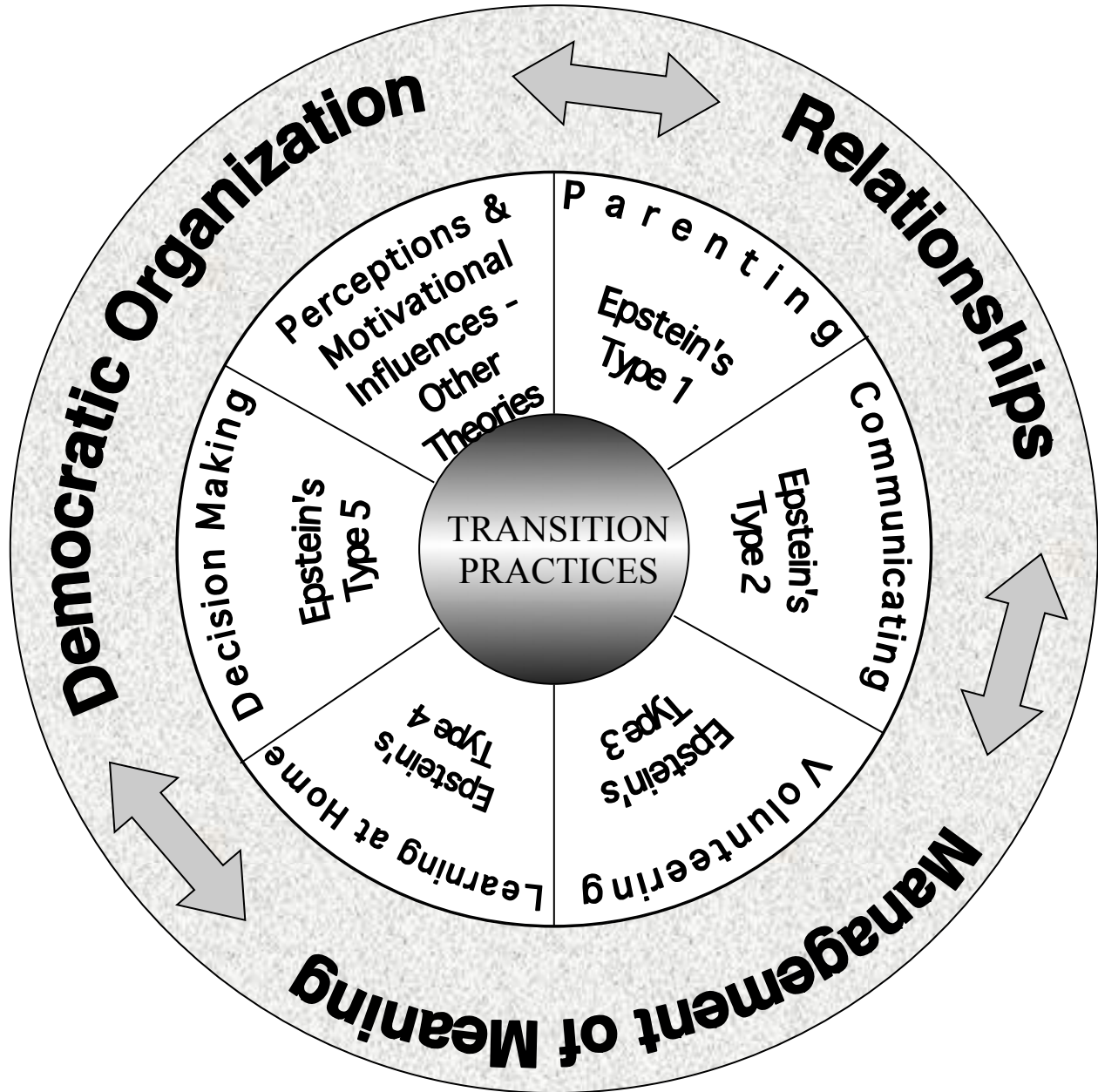
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Appendix A
Conceptual Framework



- ☒ Principal as Community Builder
- ☐ Principal for Parent-School Partnerships
- ☒ Principal for Elementary to Middle Level Transition of Parent-School Partnerships

Appendix B

Explication of Conceptual Framework

Principal as Community Builder

Democratic Organization

- Supports structures and processes that promote a participatory way of life
- Promotes the voice of constituents through the open flow of ideas, may include ongoing informed critique of norms and values
- Demonstrates ethical and moral leadership, commitment to the common good
- Invites the influence of constituents with regard to decision-making

Relationships

- Facilitates a web of partnerships and networks
- Promotes trust that is supported by norms and social contracts (covenants)
- Promotes changes in the relationships among community members that facilitate action for the common good (social capital)

Management of Meaning (Communication)

- Encourages reciprocity (two-way communication) and spirit of interdependence
- Provides opportunities for connection of constituencies
- Facilitates frequency and quality of communication among all community members
- Models active participation in a dialogical community

Principal for Parent-School Partnerships

- Epstein's Type 1 (Parenting): Assists families in providing for children's needs
- Epstein's Type 2 (Communicating): Promotes two-way communication, influences form and frequency of information (including accessibility), creates and supports policies that inform parents, provides teacher professional development
- Epstein's Type 3 (Volunteering): Goal is to involve parents at school, provides teacher professional development
- Epstein's Type 4 (Learning at Home): Provides teacher professional development, provides parent education
- Epstein's Type 5 (Decision Making): Provides opportunities for parents to contribute to decision making at the school level
- Other theories (Perceptions and Motivational Influences): Promotes parents' self-efficacy, facilitates a school environment that is friendly and accessible to parents, creates opportunities for involvement that are perceived by parents

Principal for Elementary to Middle Level Transition of Parent-School Partnerships

This is the literature gap that prompted the purpose of this study: to describe and understand how nominated middle level principals foster exemplary parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle school.

Appendix C

Nomination Request and Questionnaire

You are invited to nominate middle level principals whose approaches include exemplary parent-school partnerships for a research project to be conducted by Leslie C. Berman, doctoral candidate from the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership; College of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. This study will focus on approaches of the middle level principal regarding exemplary parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle level. Nominees are sought who

- actively facilitate parent-school partnerships;
- include support for parent-school partnerships during the transition from elementary to middle level; and
- extend their exemplary parent-school partnership practice into this transition period.

From the pool of nominees, six middle level principals will be selected to participate in this multiple case study that will seek to describe and understand how nominated middle level principals approach exemplary parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle school. Please follow the link provided here to complete a confidential questionnaire regarding your nominee(s) that will take only a few minutes of your time. A separate questionnaire must be completed for each individual nominee. In addition to a few brief questions, you will be asked for your nominee's contact information. If you are a middle school principal who meets the criteria of this study, please feel free to nominate yourself. Your thoughtful nominations are greatly appreciated.

Leslie C. Berman

[This link will lead the nominator to the web-based nomination questionnaire.]

<https://illinois.edu/sb/sec/4930298>

Consent of Nominator

In this web-based questionnaire, you will nominate a middle level principal whose approach includes exemplary parent-school partnerships for a research project that will be conducted by Leslie C. Berman, doctoral candidate from the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership; College of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The responsible project investigator is Dr. Kern Alexander, Excellence Professor in the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership; College of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Your participation in this project as a nominator of a potential research participant will not expose you to any risk greater than normal life. We anticipate that the results will increase our understanding of the role of the middle level principal with regard to parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle school. The results of this study will be used for a dissertation publication and possibly scholarly reports, journal articles, conference presentations, and other forms of sharing within the professional educational community and parent groups. In any publication or public presentation, pseudonyms of participants will be substituted for any

identifying information. No information about nominators will be included in any publication related to this study.

Your participation in this study as a nominator is strictly limited to the completion of this web-based questionnaire, is completely voluntary, and will have no effect on your status at or future relations with the University of Illinois. You are free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Should your nominee be selected to participate in this study, his/her participation will be completely voluntary and will have no effect on his/her status at or future relations with the University of Illinois. Your nominee's description as approaching parent-school partnerships in an *exemplary* manner is solely for the purposes of this study and has no bearing on his/her performance status or professional privileges at his/her school and/or district.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Ms. Berman by email at lcberman@illinois.edu or Dr. Alexander at alexandr@illinois.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

By proceeding to the next page of this web-based questionnaire, you will indicate that you have read and understand the terms of this study stated above and voluntarily agree to participate in this study solely as a nominator of a potential research participant. Proceeding to the next page and completing the web-based questionnaire will serve as your waiver of informed consent. Please print this agreement for your records before you continue.

Web-based questionnaire

Provide the following contact information for the middle school principal you are nominating whose approach:

- facilitates exemplary parent-school partnerships;
- includes support for parent-school partnerships during the transition from elementary to middle level; and
- extends his/her exemplary parent-school partnership practice into this transition period.

Contact information for the principal you are nominating:

Nominee's Name:

Nominee's School:

Nominee's Current Position:

Nominee's Email Address:

Nominee's Phone Number:

The following three short-answer questions regarding your nominee will complete this nomination.

1. Describe your nominee's leadership in facilitating parent-school partnerships, in general, at his/her middle school.
2. Does your nominee extend his/her leadership into the transition period from elementary to middle level? If so, describe.

3. Please share any other information about your nominee that may be pertinent to this study. This may include, but is not limited to the nominee's
 - role in his/her school as the lead community-builder;
 - emphasis on relationships with parents;
 - methods for communicating with parents;
 - willingness to include parents in the decision-making process.

Thank you for taking the time to nominate a middle school principal whose approach includes exemplary parent-school partnerships and for sharing your knowledge of his/her leadership in this area.

Appendix D

Screening Questions for Candidate Telephone Interviews

Thank you for participating in this initial interview, which should last no more than 40 minutes. You have been nominated as a middle school principal whose approaches lead to exemplary parent-school partnerships. A few of the nominees will be asked to participate in in-depth interviews, however from a time perspective, I cannot complete in-depth interviews with all nominees. Most of the questions will focus on your practices, purposes, and attitudes that foster parent-school partnerships. There are no right or wrong answers, as this initial interview is designed to help me understand your leadership in the area of parent-school partnerships and how your leadership influences your school practices in this area. The final question is in regard to your extension of your parent-school partnership practices to the period of transition from elementary to middle school.

Before we begin, let's take a few moments to answer your questions and/or concerns. Please do not hesitate to interrupt our interview, if you have anything you wish to share at any point.

Date

Candidate information:

Name

Gender

School

Current position

Email address

Phone

Other contact information

1. Provide a summary of your administrative experience.
2. Describe your current school. Include the number of students and the grade level configuration.
3. You were chosen for this interview because of your success in fostering parent-school partnerships. Explain the factors that have led to your success in this area.
4. How do you allocate your resources (e.g., staff, materials, time devoted to events, your time and energy) regarding parent-school partnerships?
5. Think about a time when the partnership between a parent and the school has been particularly successful. Can you identify aspects of your leadership that contributed to this successful partnership?
6. Now think about a time when the partnership between a parent and the school was not effective. Would you have done anything differently from a leadership perspective, given the chance?

7. What are your thoughts about the principal's role as a community builder? In other words, what does *Principal as Community Builder* mean to you?
8. Does your leadership include community-building practices? Please elaborate.
9. In your opinion, how does the transition from elementary to middle level affect parents?
10. Conversely, how do parents affect the transition from elementary to middle level?
11. Does your leadership in fostering parent-school partnerships extend to the period of transition from elementary to middle school? If so, describe your practices, purposes, and attitudes in this regard.

Appendix E

Screening Rubric for Candidate Telephone Interviews

Question 1: [Each screening question will be assessed separately.]

A: Practice = Often; Attitude = Committed

B: Practice = Sometimes; Attitude = Aware

C: Practice = Rarely/Never/Not Known; Attitude = Not Important/Not Clear

Principal as Community Builder							
Democratic Organization	A	B	C	Principal for Parent-School Partnerships	A	B	C
Supports structures and processes that promote a participatory way of life				Epstein's Type 1 (Parenting) Assists families in providing for children's needs			
Promotes the voice of constituents through the open flow of ideas, may include ongoing informed critique of norms and values				Epstein's Type 2 (Communicating) Promotes two-way communication, influences form and frequency of information (including accessibility), creates and supports policies that inform parents, provides teacher professional development			
Demonstrates ethical and moral leadership, commitment to the common good				Epstein's Type 3 (Volunteering) Goal is to involve parents at school, provides teacher professional development			
Invites the influence of constituents with regard to decision-making				Epstein's Type 4 (Learning at Home) Provides teacher professional development, provides parent education			
				Epstein's Type 5 (Decision Making) Supports opportunities for parents to contribute to decision making at the school level			
				Other Theories (Perceptions and Motivational Influences) Promotes parents' self-efficacy, facilitates a school environment that is friendly and accessible to parents, creates opportunities for involvement that are perceived by parents			
Relationships	A	B	C	Principal for Parent-School Partnerships	A	B	C
Facilitates a web of partnerships and relationships				Epstein's Type 1 (Parenting) Assists families in providing for children's needs			
Promotes trust that is supported by norms and social contracts (covenants)				Epstein's Type 2 (Communicating) Promotes two-way communication, influences form and frequency of information (including accessibility), creates and supports policies that inform parents, provides teacher professional development			
Promotes changes in the relationships among community members that facilitate action for the common good (social capital)				Epstein's Type 3 (Volunteering) Goal is to involve parents at school, provides teacher professional development			
				Epstein's Type 4 (Learning at Home) Provides teacher professional development, provides parent education			
				Epstein's Type 5 (Decision Making) Supports opportunities for parents to contribute to decision making at the school level			
				Other Theories (Perceptions and Motivational Influences) Promotes parents' self-efficacy, facilitates a school environment that is friendly and accessible to parents, creates opportunities for involvement that are perceived by parents			
Management of Meaning (Communication)	A	B	C	Principal for Parent-School Partnerships	A	B	C
Encourages reciprocity (two-way communication) and spirit of interdependence				Epstein's Type 1 (Parenting) Assists families in providing for children's needs			
Provides opportunities for connection of constituencies				Epstein's Type 2 (Communicating) Promotes two-way communication, influences form and frequency of information (including accessibility), creates and supports policies that inform parents, provides teacher professional development			
Facilitates frequency and quality of communication among all community members				Epstein's Type 3 (Volunteering) Goal is to involve parents at school, provides teacher professional development			
Models active participation in a dialogical community				Epstein's Type 4 (Learning at Home) Provides teacher professional development, provides parent education			
				Epstein's Type 5 (Decision Making) Supports opportunities for parents to contribute to decision making at the school level			
				Other Theories (Perceptions and Motivational Influences) Promotes parents' self-efficacy, facilitates a school environment that is friendly and accessible to parents, creates opportunities for involvement that are perceived by parents			
Totals Principal as Community Builder	A	B	C	Totals Principal for Parent-School Partnerships	A	B	C

Appendix F

Regret/Thank You Email for Non-Selected Candidates

Dear _____,

Thank you for participating in our recent telephone interview regarding my study of the approaches of middle level principals regarding exemplary parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle level. You have not been selected to continue in the next stage of my study, however I sincerely thank you for your time and your thoughtful answers to my questions. As I stated prior to our interview, there were no right or wrong responses. It was my pleasure to learn about your leadership in the area of parent-school partnerships and how your leadership influences your school practices in this area. Your students and parents are certainly fortunate to benefit from your exemplary leadership. Best of luck to you in your future endeavors, and again, thank you for the time and effort you spent regarding my study.

Best regards,

Leslie C. Berman, doctoral candidate

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Appendix G

Informed Consent Form

August 2014

You are invited to participate in a research project on approaches of the middle level principal regarding exemplary parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle school. This project will be conducted by Leslie C. Berman, doctoral candidate from the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership; College of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The responsible project investigator will be Dr. Kern Alexander, Excellence Professor from the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership; College of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In this project, Ms. Berman will engage in an in-depth semi-structured interview with you at your school. This interview will last approximately two hours. In addition, you will be asked to participate in a follow-up in-person or Skype interview of approximately two hours and will be asked to provide documents supporting your parent-school partnership transition activities and communication. A final Skype or telephone interview of one half hour will conclude the formal interview process. Other brief telephone conversations may occur in order to clarify information gathered in these three scheduled interviews and/or supporting documents. These interviews will take place during the Fall 2014 semester. In these interviews, which will be digitally recorded with your permission, you will be asked to discuss your role in parent-school partnerships, particularly as they relate to the period of transition from elementary to middle school. Digital recordings and all other information obtained during this research project will be kept in a secure locked file cabinet and will be accessible only to project personnel. The digital recordings will be transcribed and coded to remove individual's names and will be erased after the project is completed.

We do not anticipate any risk to this study greater than normal life and we anticipate that the results will increase our understanding of the role of the middle level principal with regard to parent-school partnerships in transition from elementary to middle school. The results of this study will be used for a dissertation publication and possibly scholarly reports, journal articles, conference presentations, and other forms of sharing within the professional educational community and parent groups. In any publication or public presentation, pseudonyms will be substituted for any identifying information.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time and for any reason without penalty. Your decision to participate, decline, or withdraw from participation will have no effect on your grades at, status at, or future relations with the University of Illinois. Your description as a principal whose leadership includes *exemplary* parent-school partnerships is solely for the purposes of this study and has no bearing on your performance status or professional privileges at your school and district. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. You will receive a copy of the research results after this project is completed.

If you have any questions about this research project, please contact Ms. Berman by telephone at 847-207-3234 or by email at lcberman@illinois.edu or Dr. Alexander at 217-333-0807 or alexandr@illinois.edu.

Sincerely,
Leslie C. Berman

I have read and understand the above consent form and voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Signature

Date

I do agree for interviews to be digitally recorded for the purposes of transcription.

Signature

Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

Appendix H

In-Depth Interview Questions for Study Participants

The interview will begin with the formal introduction of participant and investigator. Identifying information about the participant gleaned in the screening telephone interview will be confirmed (name, gender, school, current position, contact information). The investigator will provide a brief explanation of the study, including the purpose and research question. Procedures for the interview will be reviewed, including the use of a digital audio recorder. The participant will have the opportunity to ask questions before the interview begins.

1. What is your understanding about the principal's role in promoting a democratic school organization? How does your thinking in this regard extend to parent-school partnerships?
2. In regard to parent-school partnerships at your school, do you consider the promotion of a democratic organization in your leadership purposes and practice? If so, please describe the specifics of how you think about this and enact it in your practice.
3. What is your understanding about the principal's role in promoting relationships and partnerships at school? How does your thinking in this regard extend to parent-school partnerships?
4. In regard to parent-school partnerships at your school, how is the principal's role in promoting relationships and partnerships enacted? If this is an aspect of your practice, explain your specific thinking and actions in this regard.
5. What is your understanding of the principal's role in managing meaning or facilitating communication at school? How does your thinking in this regard extend to parent-school partnerships?
6. In regard to parent-school partnerships at your school, do you consider the facilitation of communication in your leadership purposes and practice? If so, please describe the specifics of how you think about this and enact it in your practice.
7. Describe parent-school partnerships at your school in full detail. Include anything you can think of that contributes to parent-school partnerships (e.g., resources, attitudes of school employees and the parents).
8. Describe your role regarding parent-school partnerships at your school in full detail.
9. Parent-school partnerships have often been characterized through several types of activities. What are your thoughts about the following activities? How do they apply to your purposes and practices?
 - Assisting families in providing for children's needs at home;
 - Promoting two-way communication between home and school;
 - Involving parents in volunteer activities at school, creating opportunities for involvement at school that are perceived by parents;

- Promoting parent-involvement in students' learning while at home;
- Providing opportunities for parents to contribute in decision-making at school;
- Promoting parents' self-efficacy;
- Facilitating a school environment that is friendly and accessible to parents.

10. How do you encourage parents to become involved at your school?
11. What is your understanding of the principal's role regarding barriers to parent-school partnerships at or during the transition to middle level? Name all barriers that are known to you.
12. How do you overcome barriers to parent-school partnerships at your school?
13. How do you perceive the period of transition from elementary to middle level in regard to parent-school partnerships?
14. Of what importance are parents in the transition process? Why?
15. Describe in full detail all activities at your school regarding the transition from elementary to middle level. Include anything you can think of that contributes to transition activities (e.g., resources, attitudes of school employees and the parents).
16. Do any of these activities involve and/or impact parents? If so, please describe them in full detail and explain your purposes in providing such activities for parents.
17. Describe in detail all communication with parents during the transition period.
18. What are the most important things you do regarding parent-school partnerships during the transition period?
19. How do your leadership and the resultant school activities affect the transition from elementary to middle level for the parents? Conversely, how do parents affect the transition from elementary to middle level for the school?
20. Describe your perceived positive outcomes in involving parents in the transition process.
21. Describe your perceived negative outcomes in involving parents in the transition process.
22. Think back to your answers regarding the principal's role in promoting a democratic school organization, relationships, communication, and specific parent-school partnership practices. Do your purposes and practices in these areas impact your leadership of parent-school partnerships during the transition period from elementary to middle level?
23. Is there anything we did not discuss that you wish to share regarding your thoughts, attitudes, purposes, and practices regarding your leadership of parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle level?

Appendix I

Follow-up Interview Questions for Study Participants

In the time that has passed since our in-depth interview, perhaps you have reflected on your responses, your practice, and your purposes regarding your role in parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle level. The goal of this follow-up interview is to learn of your reflections in the interim and determine if you have additional input, to learn of transition activities that have occurred in the interim and to determine if your reflection based on the initial interview has impacted your purposes and practices, and to confirm the accuracy of your responses in the first interview.

1. We'll begin with a review of your responses from our initial interview in order to refresh your memory and check the accuracy of my understanding. We will review your responses together. Please stop this process at any point in order to provide corrections and clarification, as needed.
2. You have had approximately a month since our initial interview during which to reflect on my questions and your responses. During that time have you thought of anything you did not share during the initial interview that is pertinent to this study?
3. Have your thoughts about your role regarding parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle level been reinforced in any way since we last spoke? Have they changed in any way?
4. Have your specific purposes and/or practices regarding your role in parent-school partnerships during the period of transition from elementary to middle level changed in any way since we last spoke? Do you expect to adjust your practices in the future? How? Why?
5. Describe all transition activities that have occurred since our initial interview in full detail. Have parents been involved in any of these activities?
6. Think of a particular transition activity that has occurred since our initial interview, one that involved parents (or if an activity has not taken place recently, think of one that is upcoming). What was your purpose for that activity? Did you achieve that purpose? Why or why not? What are your thoughts about the outcomes of this activity?
7. Is there anything else that you wish to share about your thoughts, purposes, and practices regarding your leadership role in parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle level?

Appendix J

Final Interview Questions for Study Participants

1. Describe the evolution of the transition period that you lead. Has it changed over the years? If so, how?
2. What do you want the parents' role to be at your school? How does your transition period set the stage for this?
3. I would like to revisit our earlier discussion about the principal's promotion of a democratic organization. Does this apply to your parent-school partnerships, in general? Does this apply specifically during the time of transition?
4. The principalship is a complex job. Where and how would you prioritize parent-school partnerships during transition?
5. How would you describe your role during the transition period? How would you describe the roles of others? Do others have an opportunity to assume leadership roles during this time?
6. Do you have future goals with regard to parent-school partnerships during the time of transition from elementary to middle level?
7. Imagine an optimal transition period for parent-school partnerships at your school. How close is your reality to this?
8. Have your ideas about parent transition changed in any way since the start of this study?
9. Thinking back over our past two to three months of discussions, do you have any thoughts or experiences to add?

Appendix K

Overview of Schools and Districts

School	Location in Illinois	Community Description	Population (community)	Racial/Ethnic Demographics* (school) [categories of ≥3% listed here]	Overall 2014 ISAT† Proficiency* (school) [State average = 58.7%]	Low-Income* (school) [State average = 51.5%]	Attendance Rate* (school) [State average = 94.5%]	Parental Contact* (school) [State average = 95.7%]	Principal Residency in District
A	Central, between Interstates 80 and 64	Rural: Farming and manufacturing	8,000+	96% White 3% Multiracial	55%	63%	95.8%	100%	Yes
B	Central, between Interstates 80 and 64	City that is home to many professionals	5,000+	98% White	69%	21%	95.8%	100%	Yes
C	Central, between Interstates 80 and 64	Rural: Farming and manufacturing	4,000+	94% White 4% Multiracial	75%	39%	96.4%	100%	Yes
D	Central, near Interstate 64	Commercial center serving large surrounding agricultural area	27,000+	58% White 29% Black 9% Multiracial 3% Hispanic	43%	62%	93.1%	98.5%	No
E	Chicago suburb, north of Interstate 80	Commercial and residential	30,000+	84% White 8% Hispanic 4% Asian 3% Multiracial	81%	9%	96.7%	100%	No
F	Chicago suburb, north of Interstate 80	Affluent residential	8,000+	83% White 8% Hispanic 6% Asian 3% Multiracial	90%	4%	95.7%	100%	No

* Source: 2014 Illinois School Report Card

† Illinois Standards Achievement Test